# What testimony?

**By DOUG SHAVER**
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Every now and then, a Christian who happens to have a law degree tries to prove that the case for Christianity would be a slam-dunk in any court of law. Perhaps the first attempt in this direction was by Simon Greenleaf in 1874, and as far as I can tell none of his successors has done any better. As legal authorities go, Greenleaf apparently was as authoritative as they come, so it's not easy for a lay person to present a credible counterargument. Even so, nothing is so just because Greenleaf says it is so, even if he says it about the law. He still needs logic on his side, and a philosopher can be every bit as good a logician as any lawyer.

Greenleaf's essay, "The Testimony of the Evangelists," has been reproduced at several Web sites. For the following I used the one at http://www.classicapologetics.com/g/GreenTes1.html.

Greenleaf says early in his essay:

> In requiring this candor and simplicity of mind in those who would investigate the truth of our religion, Christianity demands nothing more than is readily conceded to every branch of human science. All these have their data, and their axioms; and Christianity, too, has her first principles, the admission of which is essential to any real progress in knowledge. (§2)

There is an ambiguity here. Every branch of human science has its axioms, yes. And Christianity is entitled to its own axioms, yes. But non-Christians are not being unreasonable if they do not accept the special axioms of Christianity. In claiming that "Christianity demands nothing more" than what everyone else accepts, he is challenging us to judge Christianity without assuming anything beyond those axioms held in common by Christians and non-Christians. To agree that Christians are entitled to their own axioms is to do no more than admit that it can be reasonable for Christians to believe their own doctrines, and I have no interest here in trying to prove otherwise. But if the claim is not just that Christian belief is reasonable, but that disbelief is unreasonable, then that claim is indefensible without appeal to those special axioms of

Christianity.

Greenleaf also says, “The proof that God has revealed himself to man by special and express communications, and that Christianity constitutes that revelation, is no part of these inquiries” (§4). Is that because the proof is irrelevant to his case? Well, he goes on, “The fact [of Christian revelation] will here be assumed as true,” and then devotes over a thousand words to a defense of that assumption. So, is the claim of revelation relevant or not? It better not be. Greenleaf is claiming that legal principles alone, applied to relevant evidence, suffice to establish the probable truth of Christianity. If that is so, then revelation at most would take it from a probable truth to a certain truth. It doesn’t take a law degree to know that there is no legal principle affirming the truth of Christianity’s claim to be a divine revelation.

It was not clear after my initial reading whether Greenleaf is assuming the role of counsel for defendant or counsel for plaintiff. An appropriate response depends on whether he is defending Christianity against the accusation that its teachings lack proper evidence—let’s call that “unreasonable belief”—or is accusing skeptics of unreasonable doubt of Christianity’s claims notwithstanding proper evidence. The two scenarios are not equivalent. It can be the case, and often is, that reasonable people may believe some proposition based on some body of evidence while other reasonable people, examining the same body of evidence, may doubt that same proposition. It is certainly true that skeptics frequently accuse Christians of unreasonable belief, and I am prepared to stipulate for the sake of this discussion that Greenleaf’s defense is epistemologically adequate. Whether it is also legally adequate, I presume no qualification to say. My concern in this essay will be the latter accusation, that my doubt of Christianity’s core teachings is not a reasonable doubt, taking into consideration the nature of the testimony in its favor. On that issue, my legal qualifications are no better than on the former issue, but as the accused, I have a right to present my own case if I cannot afford a lawyer, and it is a fact that I cannot.

To sum up then: the plaintiff, Christianity, accuses me of unreasonable doubt. I will claim, just this once, that I am entitled to a presumption of innocence. Plaintiff’s counsel, Mr. Greenleaf, has presented his case and now rests. Herewith is my defense.

I take the core of his argument to be here:

> The importance of the facts testified, and their relations to the affairs of the soul, and the life to come, can make no difference in the principles or the mode of weighing the evidence. It is still the evidence of matters of fact, capable of being seen and known and related, as well by one man as by another. And if the testimony of the Evangelist, supposing it to be relevant and material to the issue in a question of property or of personal right, between man and man, in a court of justice, ought to be believed and have weight; then, upon the like principles, it ought to receive our entire credit here. But, if, on the other hand, we should be justified in rejecting it, if there testified on oath, then, supposing our rules of evidence to be sound, we may be excused if we hesitate elsewhere to give it credence. (§3)

In other words, if I understand him correctly, my doubt is reasonable if and only if I could justifiably decline to believe the evangelists, were they testifying in any context having nothing to do with "the affairs of the soul, and the life to come." Recall the title of his argument: "An Examination of the Testimony of the Evangelists." My defense will boil down to the claim that Greenleaf has failed to show that he can produce any such testimony. What he produces is documents that, he alleges, contain their testimony, but I doubt that allegation, and I claim that my doubt on that point is more than reasonable. Whether the testimony itself be credible or not, if I can reasonably doubt its provenance, then surely I can reasonably doubt the testimony itself.

Who are these evangelists whose testimony Greenleaf claims to offer in evidence? He identifies them as follows: (1) Matthew, a disciple of Jesus; (2) Mark, an early Christian acquainted with several apostles including Peter; (3) Luke, an associate of Paul; and (4) John, another of Jesus' disciples. Greenleaf offers some additional biographical data about each of them, and it is these four men whose testimony, contained in certain documents, he claims to offer for the court's examination. He says I am obliged to show cause why I should not believe what they say about Jesus of Nazareth. But he is obliged to show that it is in fact those four men whose testimony we have in the aforementioned documents.

He contends that the Ancient Documents Rule suffices to establish a presumption that we indeed have their testimony in those documents. I cannot agree. This is not an issue of what the law says. It is an issue of how the law should be interpreted, and I shall

defend my interpretation against his interpretation.

Here is the rule as Greenleaf states it:

> *Every document, apparently ancient, coming from the proper repository or custody, and bearing on its face no evident marks of forgery, the law presumes to be genuine, and devolves on the opposing party the burden of proving it to be otherwise.* (§8)

We'll need to spend some time on this one, because it raises several points that have to be addressed. My observations will be based on material I found at several Web sites, among them the Federal Rules of Evidence posted on the Web site of Cornell University Law School (http://www.law.cornell.edu/rules/fre/rules.htm#Rule901 and http://www.law.cornell.edu/rules/fre/ACRule901.htm). Other sites I consulted include http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/ancient_document_rule, http://research.lawyers.com/ Authenticating-Documents-in-Civil-Lawsuits.html, http://federalevidence.com/blog/2011/may/ document-content-vs-document-identity-under-fre-ancient-document-authentication-r ule, and http://library.findlaw.com/2001/Jan/1/241488.html.

We note first that the Ancient Documents Rule is a rule of authentication, not a rule of anything else. In particular it is not a rule of admissibility per se. Authentication is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of admissibility. A document can be of undisputed authenticity yet still be inadmissible as evidence.

Authentication is just a judicial finding that the document in question is genuine. What does it mean to be genuine? It means to be whatever the party offering the document says it is. If an attorney says to the court, "This document is a report written by so-and-so of what he saw on such-and-such occasion," then authentication is the process whereby he demonstrates, to the court's satisfaction, that the document actually was written by that person on that occasion for that purpose. A ruling of authenticity creates no presumption that anything in the document is true, or that even if true it proves whatever the lawyer says it proves. Documents are just a kind of evidence, and evidence is nothing more than something that is alleged to prove something else. A document, offered as evidence, is supposed to provide a reason to believe something other than the bare fact of its existence—usually that something alleged in the document

is true, or perhaps that the author was in such-and-such a state of mind. Whether the document actually does provide sufficient reason to believe whatever it is offered to prove is a decision reserved for the judge or jury in the case. Thus, no document can prove anything merely by virtue of its compliance with the Ancient Documents Rule.

We next note that the rule can be applied only to the actual physical document presented in court for a judge or jury's examination. If that document is a copy, then that copy, not the original, constitutes the evidence in that case, even if there is no dispute regarding the copy's accuracy. If the original has not been or cannot be produced, then the original is no part of the evidence in the case. Neither does anything in the rule suggest that any particular copy can be treated as representative of all copies that have ever existed. Greenleaf refers to the church's custody of the documents on which he hopes to build his case:

> The presumption of law is . . . that every document, found in its proper repository, and not bearing marks of forgery, is genuine. Now this is precisely the case with the Sacred Writings. They have been used in the church from time immemorial, and thus are found in the place where alone they ought to be looked for. (§9)

This is manifestly not the sort of custody envisioned by the Ancient Documents Rule. To make his case, he needs to establish that we have the actual testimony of four particular men. The church's historical possession of a great number of copies of documents purporting to contain their testimony does not constitute a relevant instance of the "proper repository" contemplated by the Ancient Documents Rule. If Greenleaf hopes to use the rule at all, he needs to pick a particular copy of each gospel, out of all those that now exist, and offer that copy as his evidence.

But then, that would miss the point that he really wants to make, which is that if I read any of the copies now widely available, I'm being unreasonable if I don't believe everything written therein. Why is that? Because, he says, under widely accepted legal principles, I am obliged to believe that their authors actually witnessed the events of their narratives. And what, according to Greenleaf, makes me so obliged? His answer: I have no justification for believing anything to the contrary. According to Greenleaf, if I accept those legal principles, then I must also accept the testimony of the evangelists.

Well, I am not disputing those legal principles, but I am disputing his interpretation of them.

Having given my reasons for thinking the Ancient Documents Rule irrelevant to this case, I move on to the rest of his argument, which could have been cogent on other grounds. Aside from any consideration of where we found them or whose custody they were in, we might have had good reason based on legal principles to think they were in fact written by the men who Greenleaf says were the authors, and also to think that we have good reason to believe every word of what they wrote. I'll argue that we don't have good reason to think so, that the evidence Greenleaf claims to have is nowhere near sufficient to support his case.

We must begin with the question of authorship. Even supposing the gospels to contain someone's testimony, we cannot evaluate that testimony without establishing the authors' identity. Greenleaf has offered no legal basis for admitting the testimony of unknown persons or documents of unknown provenance. His mere assertion that we know who the authors were is not itself admissible as evidence. He needs to prove that their identities are in fact known beyond reasonable doubt, and he does not do this. Let us see how he tries to do so.

> If it be objected that the originals are lost, and that copies alone are now produced, the principles of the municipal law here also afford a satisfactory answer. For the multiplication of copies was a public fact, in the faithfulness of which all the Christian community had an interest; and it is a rule of law, that:
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> > *In matters of public and general interest, all persons must be presumed to be conversant, on the principle that individuals are presumed to be conversant with their own affairs.*
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> Therefore it is that, in such matters, the prevailing current of assertion is resorted to as evidence, for it is to this that every member of the community is supposed to be privy. The persons, moreover, who multiplied these copies, may be regarded, in some manner, as the agents of the Christian public, for whose use and benefit the copies were made; and on the ground of the credit due to such agents, and of the public nature of the facts themselves, the copies thus made are entitled to an extraordinary degree of confidence, and, as in the case of official registers and other public books, it is not necessary that they should be confirmed and sanctioned by the ordinary tests of truth. (§9)

None of this proves what Greenleaf would have us think it proves. We may well

suppose that the Christians who were living in the places and at the times when copies the gospels began circulating, being conversant with their own affairs, would have known that these documents existed and were said to have been written by such-andsuch people. But from this fact, we are not compelled to infer that the authors must actually have been those people. Neither are we compelled, absent clear evidence, to suppose anything at all about those "persons . . . who multiplied those copies." They may well have believed themselves to be "agents of the Christian public," but this implies no more than that, in their own opinions, they were doing something of benefit for the Christian public. We have discovered much evidence, since Greenleaf's lifetime, that they were perfectly capable of thinking that they were benefitting the Christian public by altering the documents as they copied them. It doesn't matter whether this practice was rare or common. It is a fact that it happened, and the fact is not irrelevant to our evaluation of the authenticity of the surviving documents.

More to the present point, a widespread belief among early Christians as to the authors' identities does not itself constitute a *prima facie* case for the correctness of their belief. What the principle of conversance establishes is that, even absent evidence attesting to the prevalence of that belief, we may presume that most Christians after a certain date did believe it—i.e. most Christians could not have been unaware of the church's claim that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had written those four particular works. But there is no principle of law that says we have to credit their belief with any factual basis, except only if we can establish that the belief existed under such circumstances of time and place as to make it unlikely that the belief was erroneous. Nothing in Greenleaf's argument establishes anything of the sort. He alleges, without evidence, that the gospels were "in familiar use in the churches, from the time when the text was committed to writing" (§10). Even if this were so, there is no clear and unambiguous attestation, anywhere in the surviving documentary record, of even their existence before 180 CE. They probably had to have existed for some years before 180, but nothing compels the conclusion that they had to have been written prior to the second century. They could have been, but Greenleaf cannot argue, without assuming his conclusion, that they must have been. And if they were not, then they could not have

been written by anyone who witnessed the events recorded therein.

Greenleaf also alleges that "many sects, opposed to each other in doctrine" all used the same documents in defense of their teachings (§10). Again he offers no evidence in support of this assertion, and the scholarly community has learned since his time that it just is not so. A wide diversity of Christian sects existed as far as back in history as the extant documents can take us, and there is no unambiguous evidence of what we now know as orthodox Christianity until the early second century. The orthodox Christians in due course won the doctrinal wars, and they proceeded to write the history books. It was the orthodox church historians, beginning with Eusebius, who claimed an original gospel-based consensus with a bunch of heretical sects differing only in their interpretation of those gospels, but the claim was based on no evidence but the church's own insistence that it must have been so. This is a reasonable construal of the evidence, and no legal principle makes it unreasonable.

Greenleaf then asserts that these documents have "in all ages, down to this day, been respected as the authoritative source of all ecclesiastical power and government, and submitted to, and acted under in regard to so many claims of right, on the one hand, and so many obligations of duty, on the other;" and for this reason "it is quite erroneous to suppose that the Christian is bound to offer any further proof of their genuineness or authenticity" (§10). Yes, they have been so respected—by Christians. What is at issue here is whether it may be reasonable, under certain principles of law, for someone not a Christian to think Christians are mistaken in certain particular things they believe about Jesus of Nazareth. Greenleaf has not demonstrated any relevance between those things and "the authoritative source of all ecclesiastical power and government." I and most skeptics of my acquaintance will readily stipulate that Christians are fully entitled to submit themselves to any ecclesiastical power and government of their own choosing, and that they have no obligation to give an accounting of their choice to the rest of the world.

What comes next looks like a plain admission by Greenleaf that he is simply assuming his conclusion. He says:

> Supposing, therefore, that it is not irrational, nor inconsistent with sound philosophy, to believe that God has made a special and express revelation of his

> character and will to man, and that the sacred books of our religion are genuine, as we now have them we proceed to examine and compare the testimony of Four Evangelists, as witnesses to the life and doctrines of Jesus Christ" (§11).

Given those suppositions, then of course the life and doctrines of Jesus Christ were, most probably, exactly as the gospels say they were. But the question at issue is: Do the legal principles cited by Greenleaf compel us to accept those suppositions? Up to this point of his essay, he has not shown that they do. In particular, he has failed utterly to show why we are obliged to agree with him that the authors of the canonical gospels were in fact witnesses to that life and those doctrines. The unbeliever is not obliged to prove they were not. At this point, the burden of proof remains on the believer to show that they were. This is not to charge the believer with being unreasonable. In this essay, I am not accusing Christians of unreasonable belief. I am defending skeptics against the charge of unreasonable doubt.

Let us then move on. Greenleaf proceeds with biographical sketches of the gospel authors as identified by Christian tradition. These four men are his ostensible witnesses. He says their testimony must be accepted as true unless I have good evidence with which to impeach it. But there is nothing to impeach until it is established, beyond reasonable doubt, that it is their testimony that we have before us, and Greenleaf has established no such thing. All he has offered so far in support of this allegation is something like, "Christians have always believed so." But the law has never endorsed a supposition that religious belief must be regarded as settled fact. And neither can he, in this case, argue that secular historians happen to agree with religious orthodoxy, because the majority do not. The current consensus of expert testimony, to which the law does indeed accord some presumptive value, is that the gospels were not written by the four men so identified by church tradition.

We next consider the observation:

These tribunals are in such cases governed by the following fundamental rule:

> *In trials of fact, by oral testimony, the proper inquiry is not whether it is possible that the testimony may be false, but whether there is sufficient probability that it is true.*

It should be observed that the subject of inquiry is a matter of fact, and not of

> abstract mathematical truth. The latter alone is susceptible of that high degree of proof, usually termed demonstration, which excludes the possibility of error . . . (§26).

Quite so, but it is not even alleged that we are dealing here with oral testimony. What we are dealing with is four documents for which it is claimed that they represent written testimony. That claim is made by the plaintiff's advocate, and the advocate's claim is not itself evidence for anything. The advocate's task is to produce evidence, not to create it by his utterances. I agree that arguing "It could be false" is not sufficient to discredit any testimony except when it is alleged that the testimony must be believed because it is infallible. But the issue *whether there is sufficient probability that it is true* is just that which is to be decided in any trial. Otherwise no trial would be necessary. If sufficient probability of truth were always to be presupposed, then every case would be decided as soon as any testimony at all was uttered.

What, then, does it take to establish sufficient probability? Greenleaf responds:

> The answer to this question is furnished by another rule of municipal law, which may be thus stated:
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> > *A proposition of fact is proved, when its truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence.*
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> By competent evidence is meant such as the nature of the thing to be proved requires; and by satisfactory evidence is meant that amount of proof, which ordinarily satisfies an unprejudiced mind, beyond any reasonable doubt. (§27)

Competence, as I understand Greenleaf here in light of additional research I have done, has to do with relevance. If it is claimed that A is evidence for B, then I need some reason to think that A's being true has some actual bearing on the likelihood that B is true. If the evidence is some witness's testimony, the competence of that testimony depends on the witness's competence—how the witness came to know whatever it is to which he is testifying. "I was there and I watched it happen" is a good way for him to establish his competence. "I saw it on YouTube" is not.

For documentary evidence, the competence question goes to how the author came upon the information he recorded, given the supposition that he intended a factual report. This question cannot be answered with high confidence, generally speaking, if

we cannot in the first place determine the author's identity. We can suppose he was a witness if he says he was or we have some other reason to think he must have been. Otherwise, his report cannot be any more competent than his sources, and we cannot judge the competence of his sources if he does not tell us who they were. Nor is it the case that unknown people have to be presumed competent. Greenleaf offers no legal principle that could justify that presumption. He says that the claims of scripture "may be said to be proved when they are established by that kind and degree of evidence which, as we have just observed, would, in the affairs of human life, satisfy the mind and conscience of a common man" (§27). Very well. Let me tell a common man that a certain individual was executed during the early 20th century and was seen alive three days later by several of his friends, and let us see what kind of evidence I would have to show him before he would believe me. There are things I could tell him that would of course convince him, unless he were antecedently convinced that such a thing was impossible. But let him think it possible, and let me tell him only that I read about this in a book about whose author I knew nothing. He might believe me anyway, but will anyone call him a fool if he does not? Greenleaf tells us, "A juror would violate his oath, if he should refuse to acquit or condemn a person charged with an offense, where this measure of proof was adduced" (§27). That may be so, if we had the measure of proof Greenleaf says we have. If the gospels were indeed the testimony of the particular men to whom Greenleaf attributes their authorship, then it would perhaps be unreasonable to doubt them. But we have no good evidence so far, beyond the word of Greenleaf himself, that they are such testimony.

Greenleaf next raises the issue of "establishing the credibility of the witnesses." He assure us:

> On this point the municipal law furnishes a rule, which is of constant application in all trials by jury, and is indeed the dictate of that charity which thinketh no evil:
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> > *In the absence of circumstances which generate suspicion, every witness is to be presumed credible, until the contrary is shown; the burden of impeaching his credibility lying on the objector.*
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> This rule serves to show the injustice with which the writers of the Gospels have

> ever been treated by infidels; an injustice silently acquiesced in even by Christians; in requiring the Christian affirmatively, and by positive evidence, *aliunde*, to establish, the credibility of his witnesses above all others, before their testimony is entitled to be considered, and in permitting the testimony of a single profane writer, alone and uncorroborated, to outweigh that of any single Christian. (§28)

But we are not confronted by the men who Greenleaf claims to be the writers of the gospels. Perhaps we are confronted by somebody's testimony, but we don't know whose it is. His argument here assumes facts not yet in evidence. He asserts knowledge of who the writers were, but his mere assertion is inadmissible on its face as proof of anything. And testimony contrary to his assertion is not from "a single profane writer." It is the majority opinion of competent authorities. Furthermore, the testimony of those scholars who declare the gospels to have been written anonymously is not uncorroborated. They have examined the extant manuscripts and all the other evidence relevant to a determination of who might have written them.

Let us proceed now on the assumption that the gospels are somebody's testimony. Are we obliged, as Greenleaf argues, to assume it true until proven false? Not, that is not what the rule says. The rule, as he quoted it, is *presumed credible, until the contrary is shown*. Credible is not equivalent to true. To sustain reasonable doubt about something a gospel writer says, I don't have to prove that it didn't happen. I need only prove that I lack sufficient reason to take the writer's word for it. To that end we may examine Greenleaf's next legal principle.

> It is universally admitted that the credit to be given to witnesses depends chiefly on their ability to discern and comprehend what was before them, their opportunities for observation, the degree of accuracy with which they are accustomed to mark passing events and their integrity in relating them. The rule of municipal law on this subject embraces all these particulars, and is thus stated by a legal text-writer of the highest repute:
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> > *The credit due to the testimony of witnesses depends upon, firstly, their honesty; secondly, their ability; thirdly, their number and the consistency of their testimony; fourthly, the conformity of their testimony with experience; and fifthly, the coincidence of their testimony with collateral circumstances. (§29)*

And he says, "Let the evangelists be tried by these tests." Let them

indeed, provided we don't forget that they are unknown to us.

Honesty. I stipulate that the gospel authors intended no deceit.

Ability. According to Greenleaf, "the ability of a witness to speak the truth depends on the opportunities which he has had for observing the facts, the accuracy of his powers of discerning, and the faithfulness of his memory in retaining the facts, once observed and known" (§33). We know nothing of the gospel writers' opportunities for observing the facts they narrate, but what we do know actually allows the possibility that they had no such opportunity. Indeed, the scholarly consensus is that lack of opportunity was not just possible but probable.

Number and consistency. We have four witnesses. According to Greenleaf, "There is enough of discrepancy to show that there could have been no previous concert among them, and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same great transaction, as the events actually occurred" (§34). Granted that the discrepancies rule out collusion or conspiracy, there is enough textual agreement to lead most scholars to rule out independence, too, except possibly in the case of John's gospel. Furthermore, some of the discrepancies are such as to preclude everything's being "as the events actually occurred." It is impossible, or at the very least reasonably doubtful, that every event reported by every gospel author actually occurred. Absent a commitment to inerrantism, the common man will conclude, on the basis of the narratives alone, that some of it didn't really happen.

Greenleaf appeals again to fairness: "All that is asked for these witnesses is that their testimony may be regarded as we regard the testimony of men in the ordinary affairs of life. This they are justly entitled to; and this no honorable adversary can refuse." He can judge my honor as he must, but I don't encounter ancient documents in the ordinary affairs of my life. I cannot tell you how I would respond to four men telling me that they had seen with their own eyes a man alive three days after being killed and buried, but that is not the sort of testimony I am getting in this case. In this case, I am getting copies of four documents of unknown authorship alleging that such a resurrection occurred, and most of them containing not a hint as to what sources the unknown authors relied on for their information.

Conformity with experience. We should believe some testimony if, there being no other objections, it is consistent with our experience. But what if it's not consistent? If that's supposed to make no difference, then this criterion is irrelevant. There would be no point in mentioning it if conformity with experience ought to have nothing to do with whether we believe what someone tells us. And the gospel authors report quite a few things that fail utterly to conform with my experience. Does that justify my saying they could not have happened? No, it doesn't. I am not saying here, and I have never said anywhere in any of my writings, "Those things could not have happened." Greenleaf offers a brief rebuttal to Hume and Spinoza before declaring, "But the full discussion of the subject of miracles forms no part of the present design. Their credibility has been fully established, and the objections of skeptics most satisfactorily met and overthrown by the ablest writers of our own day, whose works are easily accessible" §38. But it just does not matter whether anybody ever has succeeded or ever could succeed in proving the impossibility of miracles. Never mind miracles in general. What matters to the reasonableness of my doubt is whether the mere assertion, by someone I know nothing about, that a particular miracle happened is supposed to be all the evidence I need to become convinced that it happened, when I consider that unknown person's assertion in the light of everything I have personally experienced.

Coincidence with collateral circumstances. Greenleaf comments thus:

> This test is much more accurate than may at first be supposed. Every event which actually transpires has its appropriate relation and place in the vast complication of circumstances, of which the affairs of men consist; it owes its origin to the events which have preceded it, is intimately connected with all others which occur at the same time and place, and often with those of remote regions, and in its turn gives birth to numberless others which succeed. In all this almost inconceivable contexture, and seeming discord, there is perfect harmony; and while the fact, which really happened, tallies exactly with every other contemporaneous incident, related to it in the remotest degree, it is not possible for the wit of man to invent a story, which, if closely compared with the actual occurrences of the same time and place, may not be shown to be false. (§39)

In short, how well does the testimony fit with everything else we think we know about the time and place under discussion? Greenleaf devotes much space to a defense of his claim that the fit is perfect. Suffice it to say in response that competent authorities

are not of one mind about the concord between the gospel narratives and various independently confirmed facts about the political, social, religious, and cultural environment that obtained in first-century Palestine.

Greenleaf concludes:

> With the relative merits of modern harmonists, and with points of controversy among theologians the writer has no concern. His business is that of a lawyer examining the testimony of witnesses by the rules of his profession, in order to ascertain whether, if they had thus testified on oath, in a court of justice, they would be entitled to credit and whether their narratives, as we now have them, would be received as ancient documents, coming from the proper custody. If so, then it is believed that every honest and impartial man will act consistently with that result, by receiving their testimony in all the extent of its import. (§48)

Alas for his case, he could not produce those witnesses, and so we cannot know what they would have said under oath in any court. The witnesses we do have are four men about whom we know not so much as their names, whose competence we have no way of evaluating but some good reason to doubt, and whose stories do not conform to the realities of life as most of us experience it. Those stories could be mostly true for all that anyone alive today can prove beyond any doubt at all. But given the meager evidence offered by Greenleaf, we remain entitled to reasonable doubt.

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