

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT EXAMINED.

THE FOUR GOSPELS.

BY

JULIAN,

*Author of "The Popular Faith Exposed," "Bible Words: Human,
not Divine," "The Pillars of the Church," Etc.*

ISSUED FOR THE

Propagandist Press Committee.

LONDON :

WATTS & CO., 17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET ST.

Price One Penny.

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PART III.

THE FOUR GOSPELS.

What is Required in a Treaty.—The New Testament professes to be a message of reconciliation between God and man, and the messenger, we are told, was God's own son. If so, without doubt the only thing for man to do is to ascertain these three things :—

1. Is the envoy what he professes to be ?
2. Was he sent to bring the treaty ?
3. Are the terms stated the exact terms he was commissioned to deliver ?

If we disbelieve any one of these points, we should dismiss the messenger and break up the negotiation.

Edward I. laid siege to Calais, and when the people were reduced to great straits he sent a herald to the governor of the town, promising to raise the siege on certain conditions. These conditions were fully stated in a roll, which was handed in. Plainly, the Mayor of Calais would make himself sure that no trick was played him before he delivered up the keys of the city. As this is now a matter of history, you and I must judge for ourselves whether the writer has stated the case rightly or not ; and, if we find him perpetually blundering in his names, dates, incidents, and parallel events, we should read the book as we read the Chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth, or Arthur and his Round Table. Parts may be true, but they must be proved from other sources ; for *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus* is a principle applicable to all historians.

Apply this to the New Testament. Jesus, a man of Nazareth, and called the son of Joseph the village carpenter, professed to be the son of Almighty God. Is this quite certain ? Is it quite certain that the man proved to be

a descendant of David, and known by his townsmen as the son of Joseph and Mary, was neither one nor the other? Is it quite certain that he, of whom his neighbours and kinsfolk said "his brothers and sisters dwell among us," had neither brother nor sister? Is it quite certain that God sent Jesus from Heaven to earth to bring his treaty of peace to man? And is it quite certain that the record given in the Gospels may be fully relied on as exact in every particular? Is all this so certain that none can doubt it, or ever has doubted it?

The Gospels our Only Record of the Treaty.—As we are living many hundreds of years since these things are said to have happened, we can know about them only historically; and the records ought to be by contemporaries of undoubted veracity, of approved ability, and wholly without bias. Have we such documents?

We have four books called "Gospels," which profess to give us an unvarnished record, without extenuation or addition; and, furthermore, they profess to have been written under the direct guidance of God himself. This is a great claim, and ought to be established without a shade of doubt. Every founder of a religion, and many founders of civil laws also, have claimed a similar inspiration; but no one qualified to judge places the least reliance on such claims. Mohammed asserted that he was instructed by the angel Gabriel. He tells us the original copy of his Koran was written by rays of light upon a tablet resting on the throne of the Almighty, and that a copy, bound in white silk, was read to him piecemeal by Gabriel, and inscribed by "holy inspiration" on his heart. This certainly is even a higher claim than that made by the evangelists; but its truth must be tested in precisely the same way. If the Koran is worthy of credit, the Gospels are false; for the "book written by the light of Heaven," and inscribed by the Holy Ghost on the prophet's heart, affirms that Christ was *not* crucified, whereas the Four Gospels, inspired by the same Holy Ghost, declare that he was.

In one respect the Koran has this advantage. It was dictated chapter after chapter by the prophet himself, and was inscribed upon date-leaves and tablets of white stone not above a year after the prophet's death; whereas

the Gospels were not given to the world, at least as we have them, for many a year after the death of the Nazarene. There is one other point of advantage in the Koran: it is model Arabic, the most tuneful, the most elegant, the most perfect ever written. If God himself had written in Arabic, he could not have improved on the Koran. If not actually inspired, it might be so; for never man wrote such Arabic as this. On the other hand, the Greek of the New Testament is, for the most part, harsh and scannelled, full of solecisms, and so bad in every respect that no teacher would place it in the hands of a schoolboy to whom he wished to teach Greek. Certainly, if the Holy Ghost wrote the New Testament, he would not pass an ordinary degree at any of our universities; and any of our upper schools would disallow such Greek even in a third form.

Only One Koran, but Many Bibles.—We are told that God has given to man 104 Bibles, only four of which have survived: the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Koran. The first three, we are told, have come down to us mutilated and falsified; but the Koran remains just as it came by the hands of Gabriel from the throne of the Almighty.

No one believes the Gospels with the same sincerity that an Arab believes the Koran; and no one even attempts to act up to their precepts, as every faithful Mussulman wishes to square his life to the requirements of the Koran.

Not a doctrine, not a dogma, not a rite, not a Church practice, rests on the New Testament teaching. They all lean upon Church Councils, and may be added to or withdrawn from time to time; but no Councils have been required to determine the doctrines and dogmas of Islam, and, as for the introduction of new points of faith, an Arab would be instantly put to death who even suggested such an innovation.

How is it with the Christian religion? Even so late as the year 1870 the Catholic Church "proclaimed" the doctrine of "Papal Infallibility" as an article of faith; and in 1890 a part of the Anglican Church charged a bishop of the same Church with unlawful rites and practices even in his own diocese. As for Councils,

some 2,000 have been required to settle moot points ; and 2,000 more would not avail to produce uniformity of practice or unanimity of belief.

Undoubtedly, if the Gospels spake as plainly as the Koran, such diversity on fundamental doctrines could not exist ; but history shows us that not a single doctrine now held to be essential has been drawn from the Bible without the interference of Church Councils.

The Doctrine of the Trinity.—Take an example or two : The doctrine of the Trinity, a fundamental symbol of the Catholic creed. Noctus denied that any such doctrine is taught in the Bible ; and what was done to prove it ? In 245 a Council was convened at Ephesus, and this Council, by a show of hands, voted that the Doctrine of the Trinity should be considered an article of Christian faith.

The Divinity of Christ.—Take the divinity of Christ : Paul, bishop of Samosata (third century), denied that this dogma is taught either by the Church or in the New Testament. And how was it proved ? In 264 a Council was called at Antioch, and the question put to the vote. A show of hands being called, the chairman declared that the “ayes” had it ; so the divinity of Christ was pronounced by this Council to be an article of the Catholic faith ; but for 150 years longer the doctrine was a bone of contention, and certainly for 400 years what is called the Arian “heresy” was far more prevalent than the “Athanasian Creed.” The Council of Arles, the Council of Tyre, the Council of Milan, and the Council of Constantinople, all declared against the Council of Antioch, and voted that Jesus of Nazareth was not a divine being, but only a man born of a woman, and of the substance of that woman. This certainly was a perplexing state of things ; so in 336 a “final Council” was convened at Sardica to settle the matter. And what happened ? The Council was about equally divided. The “ayes” excommunicated the “noes,” and the “noes” excommunicated the “ayes.” Those who believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and those who believed it not, both had their part in the lake of fire with Satan and his angels. Whichever horn of the dilemma you laid hold of was equally fatal.

The Holy Ghost.—And what about the Holy Ghost? The Macedonians denied that any such dogma could be found in the Bible. So, as usual, a Council was called in 381 by Theodosius to settle the point, and the vote turned against the Macedonians; but in 518 another Council reversed the previous judgment.

In like manner we might go through every article of the symbol, and show that it has been adopted, not because the Bible definitely and distinctly enounces it, but because it has been elected into the Creed by a majority of Church dignitaries in some local Council.

Anything more unsatisfactory it is not possible to imagine. The Church dignitaries were interested partisans. They were never unanimous, and often a subsequent Council reversed the judgment of a preceding one. Had the voters been qualified to judge, they could not possibly have disagreed. They must always have been unanimous. Church doctrines are not matters of opinion, but matters of Scripture teaching; and, if the inspired Bible gives such an uncertain sound that Councils cannot agree upon the matter, it certainly is not the voice of God, and is useless as a guide to man. Protestants ignore all Councils since that of Nicæa in 325, though those called afterwards were formed on the same pattern, some of them were attended by the same ecclesiastics, and all are equally respected by the majority of Christians. If you ask why the Councils had power to determine these matters, you will receive for answer that God has promised to guide his Church into all truth. But, if so, why do Councils contradict Councils? and why are many divided in opinion? The voice of a king, self-interest, the party spirit of some leader, have always ruled the votes, and such ruling can never be relied on.

No One Practically Believes or Acts up to the Gospel.
—We have said above that no one practically believes or acts up to the Gospel. Such belief is impossible, and such conformity would disorganise society and render social life an impossibility. One of the silliest screams ever uttered by man is “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” No man in his senses believes that “he can remove mountains by faith.” Let him try on the Alps or Appennines. If these be too big, let him

try upon the Gog Magog hills of Cambridge ; and, if he can remove one single grain of sand by faith or prayer, I will doubt no longer.

No one out of Colney Hatch believes that these things shall follow his credulity : " He shall cast out devils, speak with new tongues, take up serpents with impunity, and if he drinks poison it shall do him no harm " (Mark xvi. 17, 18). This promise was not limited to the apostles. The words distinctly are, " These things shall follow *them that believe.*" It is notoriously false ; and, therefore, though spoken by Jesus himself, was not spoken by the God of truth.

" The whole Bible " : let us see. " Sell all thou hast and give unto the poor. " " Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. " Is there a Christian in all Christendom that does the former or believes the latter ? " Is any sick among you—let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him ; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick. " Does anyone believe it ? If tried, would any court of law in Protestant England acquit those of criminality who followed such a direction in scarlet fever, small-pox, diphtheria, or any other disease ? Is it ever tried in our hospitals ? Would any of our bishops try it ? Would any of the hierarchy of Rome ? It is palpably untrue. How, then, can it be said that " every word of the Bible is true from the first chapter of Genesis to the last of the Revelation " ?

The Four Gospels Uncertain.—Our knowledge of the " Good Tidings " offered to man is derived solely from four anonymous books, of uncertain date, and proved to demonstration not to be original copies. It is " Somebody one day came to me and said that somebody else had somewhere read ; " and upon such uncertain tenure as this we are asked to give up body and soul, mind and understanding, reason and common-sense, to follow " a cunningly-devised fable. "

The Gospels do not even profess to be by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but only to be in accordance with their respective schools of teaching. By whom they were compiled, or who reduced them to their present form, nobody has the most remote idea. Papias tells us it was a general belief in the middle of the second

century that Peter was the dictator of the second gospel; but, if so, it ought to be called the Gospel according to Peter, and not the Gospel according to Mark.

The same bishop of Hierapolis informs us that Matthew wrote in Hebrew what was called the "Sayings [Ta Logia] of Jesus," probably from chapter iv., verse 23, to the end of chapter vii. of the first gospel; but who wrote the rest, and who translated the "Ta Logia" into Greek, is as uncertain as the authorship of the letters of Junius.

The Gospel according to Luke was a mere compilation by someone who made a *rechauffé* which he termed "according to Luke." This third gospel professes to be selections from eye-witnesses; but Luke himself was no eye-witness; who he was nobody knows; probably he was a Roman slave. In any law-court the testimony of an eye-witness would outweigh a whole theatre of second-hand witnesses. It certainly is marvellous that the Councils which determined our canonical books should have preferred a mere compilation to the "writings in order" of eye-witnesses.

As for the Gospel according to John, it could not have been in existence till late in the second century. Papias, who died 164, and Polycarp, said to have been a disciple of John, never heard of it; which would be quite incredible if it had been in existence in their lifetime.

Why Four Gospels, and Neither More nor Less?— There were at least eighty gospels in the second century, and 200 in the fourth; why, then, was the number reduced to four? Irenæus (second century), the great pillar of the Christian Church, tells us: "It is meet and right to have four gospels and no more, because there are four quarters of the globe, and four winds of Heaven." He tells us furthermore that "there are four dispensations—that of Noah, that of Abraham, that of Moses, and that of Christ." There would be some sense in this remark if he had shown the analogy between the four gospels and the four dispensations. And, in regard to the four quarters of the world, he should have shown that Matthew was meant for one quarter, Mark for another, Luke for the third quarter, and John for the fourth.

But, above all other reasons, Irenæus tells us that

Ezekiel's cherubim prefigured the four evangelists. "I beheld," says the prophet, "four wheels.....and the appearance of these wheels was as the colour of a beryl;and the wheels had one likeness, as if a wheel had been in the midst of a wheel." This is not very intelligible. Four wheels all alike, each in the middle of the other. Four penny-pieces, all alike, and each penny-piece in the middle of the three other penny-pieces. It would require a clever draughtsman to draw this quaternian wheel which was not a wheel. Now, the prophet says: "When the wheels went on their four sides.....they turned not as they went. And.....the wheels were full of eyes round about, even the wheels that they four had." I have not the remotest idea of what is meant by "the wheels that they four had;" have you? But see further on: "As for the wheels, it was cried out to them, O wheels! And every wheel had four faces—the face of a cherub, the face of a man, the face of a lion, and the face of an eagle." The face of the cherub is represented by that of a calf or ox.

This extremely queer wheel seems to have taken hold of the public fancy, and we still find the four evangelists symbolised by "four faces," but not exactly as Irenæus arranged them. Irenæus makes John to be the lion, and Mark the eagle; but, now-a-days, John is the eagle, Mark the lion, Luke the calf, and Matthew the man. Ezekiel says *each* wheel had four faces, and, if the four wheels prefigured the Four Gospels, each Gospel ought to have been four-faced.

This funny analogy of the Gospels to the wheel of Ezekiel, "which was no wheel," which "went on its four sides without turning round," which was "full of eyes" and yet had sixteen faces, seems to me unmitigated nonsense; and, if the Gospels resemble it, no wonder they "are hard to be understood." That, according to Irenæus, is the reason why only four of the two hundred gospels were selected, and I hope the reason will be found highly satisfactory.

Why the Four which Form our Canon were Selected in Preference to Others.—The next question is, Why were the four compilations which form our canonical books preferred to all the host of others? We read of

the Gospel of Andrew, the Gospel of Apelles, the Gospel of Barnabas, of James the elder, of Matthias, of Matthew (not our first gospel), of Nicodemus, of Paul, of Peter, of Philip, of Thaddeus, of Thomas, of the Apostles, and scores of others. Some are certainly older than Luke's Gospel, according to his own acknowledgment.

The Reason Given in the Synodocon.—Papius, or Pappus, in his "Synodocon" to the Council of Nicæa, says that the two hundred "versions of the gospel were all placed under a Communion Table, and, while the Council prayed, the *inspired* books jumped on the slab; but the rest remained under it." If this was the way the choice was made, it was a mere Jack-in-the-box dodge, about equal to the card tricks of a circus-horse or learned pig.

The Reason Given by Irenæus.—Irenæus tells us that "the Church selected the four most popular of the gospels: Matthew's, because it was the gospel used by the Ebionites; Mark's, because it was the gospel used by the Docetæ; Luke's, because it was the gospel used by the Marcionites; and John's, because it was the gospel used by the Valentinians." It is very strange; but all these four sects were accounted heretical, and were denounced by Church Councils. The Ebionites were Judaising Christians, who wanted to weld together the Mosaic and Christian rites, which Paul protested against so indignantly. The Docetæ were Gnostics, and disciples of Simon Magus. The Marcionites were heretics who, as Origen informs us, taught that there are three gods—one of the Jews, another of Christians, and the third of the Gentiles. As for the Valentinians, they were Platonists, who wanted to mix Platonism and Christianity into pinchbeck, and pass it off for gold.

The Account Given by the Council of Laodicea.—In the Council of Laodicea, held in 366, each book of the New Testament, we are told, was decided by ballot. The Gospel of Luke escaped by only one vote, while the Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse were rejected as forgeries. A subsequent Council, held later in the same year, reversed the latter part of this judgment. Some forty years afterwards another Council pronounced the two books undoubted forgeries, and in

twenty other Councils they were tossed about from limbo to Paradise; at one time pronounced to be inspired by the Holy Ghost, and at another time ascribed to the "father of lies." When doctors disagree who is to decide? Why is Council A better than Council B? How can such a question be settled by a ballot-box? And what is the value of Councils if they flatly disagree? The vote of such convocations is of no more value than a toss up. It is ridiculous. Why is all this suppressed by ecclesiastical writers? He who suppresses the truth is as much a false witness as he who utters direct falsehoods.

What is Meant by the Church.—Harold Browne, late Bishop of Winchester, tells us that the "canon of both the Old and New Testament depends solely on the authority of the Church, which alone can determine what books shall be received and what rejected" ("Articles," p. 159); but he fails to inform us what he means by the Church. Does he mean the Greek Church, the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, any or all of the thousand and one sects which have called themselves the true Church since the death of Jesus to the present hour? Apparently the voice of the Councils is the voice of the Church, and, if so, it is wholly worthless, as it constantly gives itself the "lie direct;" and one Council anathematizes another Council with all the bitterness of the most ignorant bigotry.

The Church, says Dr. Browne, is the one and only tribunal to which appeal is to be made. Well, what has the Church decided respecting the Apocalypse? Let us see. In 366 the Council of Laodicea excluded it from the canon of Scripture; but, in 397, the Council of Carthage declared it to be "equal in every respect to all the other books." Will Dr. Browne, or any other bishop, inform us which of these two Councils was the "voice of the Church," and why?

Several Books Accepted by the Church are not Contained in our Canon.—We have referred to the uncertain voice of the Church respecting books admitted into our canon; we would now refer to some which the Church at one time received, but which are not enrolled in our New Testament. Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth,

in the second century, tells us, in a letter to the Church of Rome, that "all Christians read on the Lord's Day Clement's Epistle in their assemblies." But I fail to find this book in the New Testament. Eusebius also says that Clement's Epistle was universally read and received in the Church, "both in his own day and in all former times." That, I think, is pretty strong language.

"The Codex Damascenus" contains, as part of the canonical New Testament, the Epistle of Barnabas and part of "The Shepherd of Hermas." "The Codex Sinaiticus," certainly one of the oldest in existence, contains the same. Why have these books been discarded? Eusebius (iii. 3) informs us that "The Shepherd of Hermas" was read in all churches when he was Bishop of Cesarea. Justin Martyr, who died in 167, quotes entirely from "Memoirs of the Apostles;" and Rufinus mentions other books which, in his time, were received into the Church, but are now cast out. If we examine the quotations of the Church Fathers, we shall undoubtedly decide that the books they cited are not the books which have come down to us. Justin Martyr tells us that "when Jesus was baptised the river Jordan burst into flames." Where is this stated by the four evangelists?

Again, the same Justin says that "believers are the true children of God;" and we are told that this is a quotation from the Fourth Gospel. It is not only no quotation from that gospel; but the phrase, "true children," never once occurs in that gospel. Again, he says: "The blood of Christ sprang not of human seed, but from the will of God;" and this we are told is quoted from the Fourth Gospel; but nothing like it occurs in our version of any one of the Four Gospels. Again, Justin says: "If anyone prunes a vine, it sprouts out again;" and this is claimed as a quotation from the Gospel according to John. If so, most assuredly our Gospel is not the same as that used by Justin; for no such words can be found in our New Testament. It would occupy too much space to go over all the quotations of the Christian Fathers; but I think I am not wrong in stating that no quotation in all these numerous books, except, perhaps, a short phrase or two, can be

found in any book of our Canonical Scriptures, and the inference is irresistible that our Scriptures and theirs are not the same.

The Witness of the Spirit no Guide to Truth.—The framers of the Belgic Confession, seeing the difficulty, tell us that “they accept the authorised books, not because the Church enforces them on us, but because their own minds assure them that they are the word of God.” Methinks this is a very uncertain tribunal, for education made Romans Pagans, Britons it made Druids, the Chinese Buddhists, Jews it made believers in Moses, and the Arabs believers in the Koran. A Unitarian does not see with the same eye as a Trinitarian, a Non-conformist as a Ritualist, a Protestant as a Catholic. At ten years of age we may be fully persuaded in our own mind one way, at twenty another, at fifty something else, and at eighty we may see the unwisdom of all our former convictions.

What Baxter Says.—Baxter says: “The Light of the Spirit would never have enabled me to see that ‘Solomon’s Song’ was canonical, and the ‘Book of Wisdom’ apocryphal. Nor could I, by my own unaided spirit, ever credit as historical the Books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel.” To these he might have added the Apocalypse. He accepted those books, not because his “mind assured him that they were inspired,” but in spite of his conviction the other way.

No Gospel Contemporaneous with Apostolic Times.—No gospel was contemporaneous with apostolic times. The Gospel according to Matthew is generally considered the oldest of the four; but it certainly was not written by a contemporary. In chap. xxviii. 7, 8, the writer, speaking of the potter’s field, bought by the blood-money cast by Judas into the temple, says: “It is called the ‘Field of Blood’ even to the present day.” This remark shows to demonstration that a considerable lapse of time had passed between the event and the record. In verse 15 of the same chapter we have another similar instance. Speaking of the hush-money given to the soldiers, to induce them to say that the disciples came by night and stole away the body of

Jesus, the author adds : " This tale is commonly reported among the Jews even to the present day." The impression left on the mind by these words is, that the writer was not writing to Jews, nor from the country of the Jews, but from some other country, and that the event was one of long ago. If this is true of the oldest gospel, *à fortiori* it applies to all subsequent ones.

The Gospels Flatly Contradict Each Other.—The synoptic gospels distinctly state that Jesus made his " triumphant entry into Jerusalem " at the *beginning* of his ministry. The Fourth Gospel informs us it was his last function, just before his trial and execution. Both these statements cannot possibly be true ; and apostles, disciples, and eye-witnesses could not have so blundered. They must have known whether it was the first act of his public ministry or the last.

Mark says that Jesus was crucified at the third hour of the day (9 a.m.), and at the "*sixth* hour there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour," when Jesus expired (xv. 25, 33). The Johannine Gospel asserts with equal precision that Pilate said to the Jews at the *sixth* hour, " Behold your king ! " and the Jewish mob yelled out, " Away with him ! away with him ! " Both these statements cannot be correct. If Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock in the morning, he certainly could not be standing at the bar of Pilate three hours later.

Again, the first three gospels inform us that Jesus was crucified *after* the Pascha ; but John affirms that he was " crucified, dead, and buried " *before* that feast.

Matthew and Luke profess to prove that Jesus was the son of Joseph, a lineal descendant of David, which, no doubt, was an essential characteristic of the promised Messiah. John ignores all this, and insists that he was the Logos, the incarnate son of God, and no descendant of David at all.

These may be called the four most important incidents in the life of Jesus ; but the witnesses contradict each other on every one of them. There are a host of such discrepancies. I will mention one out of many, not in the gospels, but in Paul's epistle. Job xix. 26 says : " Though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet *in my flesh* shall I see God." Paul says (Cor.

xv. 50): "*Flesh* and blood *cannot* inherit the kingdom of God, neither *doth* corruption inherit incorruption." Comment is needless. Everyone must see in a moment that these two statements are not reconcilable.

Christian Writers Accused of Falsehood and Forgery by Christian Writers.—But infinitely the worst impeachment of all is that of gross interpolation and a wilful falsifying of Scriptures. This charge, be it remembered, is made not by enemies only, but by the most honoured of the Christian Fathers and historians.

Eusebius declares that it is "lawful and fitting to employ falsehood in behoof of the Church;" and he speaks of "the gross prevalence of sacred forgeries and lying frauds" introduced into the books of Scripture. "Whole paragraphs," he adds, "have been foisted in by our predecessors."

Origen tells us that falsehood is actually laudable if thereby the cords of the Church are lengthened and its stakes strengthened. "It is not only justifiable," he says, "but our bounden duty, to lie and deceive if by such guiles we can catch souls."

Augustine says: "Many things have been added by our forefathers even to the words of our Lord himself. Sentences have been added neither uttered by Christ, nor yet written down by any of his apostles. No one knows by whom."

Bishop Faustus (who died 320) hesitated not to say that "words and whole paragraphs have been inserted into the books of Scripture *ad libitum*."

Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth, says the same thing (see Eusebius iv. 23).

Mosheim, the Church historian, is very indignant at this palpable interpolation and falsifying of Scripture. Indeed, no one can read Church history, so full of false decretals, lying miracles, and guileful ways, without feeling that the Boaz of the Temple is falsehood, and its Jachin deception.