

EVIDENCE OF CHRISTIANITY,

DERIVED FROM

ITS NATURE AND RECEPTION.

BY

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REVISED WITH REFERENCE TO RECENT OBJECTIONS.

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P R E F A C E.

THE republication at the present time of a treatise written nearly forty years ago, has been suggested by the volume of "Essays and Reviews," to which general attention has been lately drawn. Though there is nothing in that volume to disturb established faith, there is much which is calculated to leave a certain class of readers in a state of doubt and perplexity, equally inconsistent with safety and with comfort. Many persons are cast upon the world, and engaged in the business of active life, who have never seriously examined the foundations of the religion to which they nominally belong. They treat it with respect, they acknowledge the benefits which it confers upon society; but vague notions of uncertainty in its evidence, and of difficulties in its doctrines, float upon the mind, and keep them in an unprofitable state of hesitation.

Meanwhile, a volume is put forth by persons of

known talent and position, which insinuates that the leading events recorded in the Bible have been disproved by recent discoveries in science and history; which casts doubts upon the received interpretation of Scripture as irreconcilable with "scientific criticism;" and which rejects as wholly incredible the testimony on which the Gospel revelation was made known to the world, and is now received by Christians. A work of this kind, issuing from those who might rather be expected to defend the Scriptures than to impugn their authority, can hardly fail to have an injurious effect; and may seem to justify the neglect, at least, of a revelation against which so much has been said by persons who might be supposed to be impartial and disinterested judges.

There can be no doubt that this, like other attacks upon Christianity, will result in producing fresh confirmation of its divine authority. There can be no doubt of this sceptical volume receiving such answers as shall reduce it to its proper level. Many such have already appeared. The Author of our religion Himself appealed to proofs, when He required the Jewish nation to believe that He "came forth from God;" and Christianity has never shrunk from the "free handling" of the evidence on which

its claim to be believed depends. But *believed* it must be, that it may avail to any soul. Christianity is everything, or nothing. For any practical purpose, it must be rejected altogether, or embraced altogether. If Jesus Christ is not the Son of God, he is not the Redeemer of the world. But if he is really what the history represents him, "there is no other name under heaven given amongst men, whereby we may be saved."

This it is the more necessary to bear in mind, because it is the system of neological or rationalistic writers to keep it out of sight. Without actually denying the truth of Christianity, they argue about it as if it were a fiction; and professedly remain within the building, whilst they are, in fact, undermining its foundations.

Now, the object of the following treatise is to show that the foundations stand sure; that the truth of the Gospel is established by the Gospel itself; by the internal evidence contained in its own nature, and by the acknowledged fact of its reception in the world. The idea of "an external revelation" may be repudiated; supernatural interference with the order of nature may be pronounced incredible. But still there remains a miracle which

defies all doubt, and refutes all sophistry: The Christian religion exists. How came it to exist, unless the events took place which account for its origin and promulgation?

This is the idea which I have endeavoured to carry out and expand. The argument has, at least, one advantage—it leads to the consideration of the religion itself. And much of the scepticism which prevails would be removed, if the Bible itself were studied, rather than discussions about the Bible.

April, 1861.

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CHAPTER X.

FIRST PROMULGATION OF CHRISTIANITY.

I HAVE shown, in the preceding chapters, the strong internal evidence which supports the divine authority of the Christian Scriptures. And yet a great deal of internal evidence must always remain, which it is not possible to draw out into actual proof. The attentive reader of the New Testament will find this at every turn; and the best use he can make of the arguments which have been urged, would be to employ them as hints according to which he might examine the Gospel for himself.

I come now to consider the first propagation of the religion. We have indisputable proof that it was actively and successfully propagated, and made its way with surprising rapidity, when we know that there were multitudes of Christians of both sexes and of all ages, in Rome, in Greece, and in various parts of Asia, within seventy years of the crucifixion.¹

¹ See ch. i. p. 8. At large in Paley, p. ii. c. ix.

This is an historical truth; and when the nature of the religion, its originality, and its demands, are considered, it may well be reckoned an extraordinary fact. We may, indeed, be loosely told, that mankind are naturally fond of the marvellous; that the ignorant are prone to superstition; and that in a barbarous age or country any idle tale finds a multitude ready to give it their belief. But a reasonable man will not be satisfied with anything so vague as this. Though the marvellous may be greedily listened to, when it demands nothing further than an idle acquiescence, mankind are more circumspect and incredulous when they are called upon to sacrifice all their former opinions, desires, habits, and prejudices. The cause could not be forwarded by Jewish superstition, since it is abundantly plain, that the Jews were extremely slow and unwilling to receive Christianity, and in fact never did adopt it, as a people; neither can we resort to barbarism, since among the nations which furnished the first proselytes, were some of the most civilized then existing, in an age proverbial for civilization. It becomes, therefore, an interesting object of inquiry, to trace the manner in which Christianity first gained ground.

However familiarly spoken of, it is not an occurrence of every day to change the religion of mankind. Should any one affirm the contrary, no sufficient reason can be alleged, why that should not

be practicable now, which is believed to have been found practicable eighteen hundred years ago. Let us imagine a similar case; and suppose a number of persons in this or any other country to associate themselves together, and profess that they had a commission from God to model anew the civil and religious institutions of the land, and re-establish, for example's sake, the principles of the law of Moses. Suppose them to assert, in conformity with this pretension, that God required the nation to lay aside their present religious services, and to introduce in their stead, the Jewish ceremonial: to resort for the purpose of national worship annually to the capital city, as the Israelites were accustomed to do: to abstain from certain kinds of food; and to keep holy the original Sabbath, instead of the day of Jesus' resurrection. Or farther; that he commanded them to leave their fields unsown, and their orchards unpruned, every seventh year, and not to gather during that year even the spontaneous produce of the ground: to make no bargains of sale for their lands beyond fifty years, but that all estates purchased during the intermediate period should be resigned at the expiration of that term to the original owner.

This would be, as Christianity was, a new religion; and Christianity, from its Jewish converts, required a renunciation of prejudices, and from the Gentiles a change of habits and customs, not less complete

and violent. The doctrine of the resurrection of a person who had suffered on the cross, and of baptism in his name for remission of sins, was not more agreeable to their natural prepossessions than anything in the case here imagined. Private interests were equally affected, when they that believed forsook their houses or lands or their nearest relatives "for the kingdom of God's sake," or "sold their possessions and goods, and had all things common."¹

It is useful sometimes to realize an idea. Let us suppose doctrines of this sort to be preached within our own knowledge. Every individual would feel that some or other of the provisions of such an innovation concerned himself. Argument, therefore, of every kind would be employed, from the clamour of the vulgar up to the reason of the well-informed. The most charitable opinion would set down such teachers as fanatics, who might believe themselves the servants of God, but were really under the grossest delusion. But the more general opinion would condemn them as workers of mischief under the disguise of religion. No individual would listen to the improbable pretence, that they acted under a divine commission: they would be reckoned enthusiasts or impostors, who must either be silenced or punished.

Those, however, who had undertaken a scheme of this nature, would of course be prepared for opposi-

¹ Luke xviii. 29. Acts ii. 44.

tion. We may conceive that they would be furnished with arguments in defence of the regulations just now supposed; and reference might be made to the law of Moses, by which these very customs and ordinances were once established. But it would be waste of time to prove that argument, persuasion, and assertion would be equally unable to gain attention to such innovators.¹ Those who believe the national religion to be from God, would condemn them: those who regard it not, would despise them.

Suppose them to go farther still, in order to establish their claim to be heard. Suppose them to confess that they depended on argument no farther than to explain their object; that the proofs of their mission were of a different nature; that they did not expect to be believed on their own assertion, but appealed to proofs of supernatural assistance by which their mission was authenticated. It is evident

¹ Unless, indeed, the argument might prove an accomplishment of prophecy, and, therefore, show a species of miracle. The force of the appeal made by Jesus and the Apostles to the Jewish Scriptures depended entirely on the accordance of those Scriptures with their mission. If it be urged, that their success was favoured by their reference to writings which the Jews acknowledged to be sacred, two important inferences follow: first, that the alleged prophecies were in previous existence; next, that they agreed with the circumstances under which "Jesus who was called Christ," actually appeared, and lived, and died.

Luther, by appealing to the Scriptures, made a very successful innovation in religion. But if there had been no Scriptures of authority acknowledged to be paramount, or if these had not borne him out in his appeal, would he have been listened to for a moment?

that this pretence would avail them, or not, exactly according to its agreement or disagreement with positive facts. We can easily conceive fanatic persons claiming credit for a power of working miracles, to whom no such power belonged; but we cannot conceive such persons being generally attended to and credited, unless their claim were supported by facts too plain to be denied. If no supernatural power accompanied them, the pretence to it would only sink them lower in public estimation; instead of deluded enthusiasts, they would be treated as designing impostors; and the idea of their establishing a new religion on the ruins of the old would become more visionary than ever. In a very few days the attempt itself, and the party which had undertaken it, would be numbered among things forgotten. Give them rank; give them authority; give them education; let no external advantages be wanting; still the barrier opposed by national belief, prescriptive customs, and personal habits, is so strong, that it has never been overcome without some commensurate power, civil or military. Whoever will look into the subject so steadily, as to propose to his mind an attempt like that under consideration, will perceive that I have not exaggerated its difficulties. Yet these difficulties were encountered by the Apostles. I have supposed nothing greater than they attempted; nothing greater than

they achieved ; and not in a single city, but over half the world ; the same scheme which we at once declare to be impracticable as to our own age or country, was tried within the first century throughout the most civilized parts of the world then known, and succeeded.

Let us inquire how it succeeded. The account which is borne on the face of the history relates, that at an annual feast at Jerusalem, the attention of certain Jews who had resorted thither from many different countries for the purpose of national worship, was attracted by a party of Galileans, who addressed the multitude in their respective languages. We can form some idea of the nature of such an occurrence, by figuring to ourselves a Jewish assembly in any of the European capitals, where Jews of every country are assembled ; and supposing twelve persons of the same persuasion, who were known never to have travelled, to begin a comment upon the Hebrew Scriptures, in the different languages of Europe.

During the inquiry which this circumstance excited, one of these, named Peter, who had been a fisherman in his native province, Galilee, undertook to explain the subject of the general astonishment by referring to a passage in their prophets, whose authority all acknowledged ; and which contained a promise of interposition like that which the assembly

was now witnessing. And he proceeded to this effect, declaring the purpose of the present miracle.¹

Hear my explanation of this visible interposition of Almighty power. Ye, the men of Israel, have crucified Jesus of Nazareth ; to whose divine mission God bore witness by the miracles which he enabled him to perform in the sight of you all. God, however, has raised him from the dead, as your great prophet David foretold concerning him, in a passage with which you are familiar ; but which, you must be aware, cannot apply to David, whose death and burial are undisputed : but which does, in truth, foretell the resurrection of that expected Messiah whom God had promised from the race of David. We here stand up and testify, that Jesus has risen again, according to the prophecy ; and that he has shed forth upon us his disciples the Holy Spirit, the effects of which ye now see and hear. "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God hath made that same Jesus whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

This was the first public declaration of the divinity or Messiahship of Jesus, after his death ; and was so convincing to the hearers, that three thousand from that moment made open confession of their belief, and were added to the existing body of his disciples.

¹ See Acts ii. 14, &c.

Now there must surely have been something very insuperable in the proofs presented to the minds of this assembly, when so large a number pleaded guilty to the charge of having been accessory to the execution of one whom they ought to have recognized as bearing a divine commission by the works which he performed; and even agreed to embrace a religion preached in his name, as the only remaining condition of pardon. They must have been impressed with a very strong conviction, before they consented to acknowledge him as the Son of God, who not two months before had suffered the death of a malefactor. There is no time when men are less likely, without overpowering testimony, to acknowledge a fact, than when it proves themselves guilty. Nor was there any imaginable reason for their making this concession, except the conviction of their understandings and their consciences. There was nothing said to excite their passions, nothing to alarm their fears, nothing to raise their hopes, unless it derived force from undeniable facts. There was no proof that Jesus had been sent from God, unless, as Peter asserts, he had been really "approved of God among them" by miraculous deeds. There was no weight in the prophecy adduced, and which they had not been accustomed to apply to the expected Messiah, except what it might obtain from the fact affirmed, the resurrection of Jesus. There was no proof of his exercising super-

natural power now, more than when he suffered on the cross, unless that power were actually witnessed in the gifts conferred on the Apostles. Was there no one in that numerous assembly who could refute the unexpected interpretation of an ancient prophecy given by an uneducated Galilean? No plain man of common sense, who could say, we heard of no "wonders, or signs, or mighty deeds"? No one who could account, in any ordinary way, for the use of various languages? Peter's speech depended for success entirely on the coincidence of actual fact with his arguments: here was nothing refined, nothing far-fetched, nothing to perplex the understanding of reasonable men; but his words came home to their consciences; and instead of putting down the Apostles with the hand of power as disturbers of a solemn assembly, they appeal to them as men and brethren, eagerly inquiring how they might atone for the crime in which they had been concerned. Yet it does not appear to have been one of those simultaneous impressions, which sometimes hurry away a multitude without reflection or in spite of reason. The historian does not say, that the conviction was unanimous. "They that gladly received his word were baptized:" which implies that some resisted arguments which proved effectual with the majority of that assembly.

Shortly after, this scene was repeated on a similar

occasion in Jerusalem.¹ Two of the Apostles performed a remarkable cure upon a cripple who was known in a regular station as beggar at the entrance of the temple. From the notoriety of the person, the miracle excited general astonishment. Again Peter addressed the multitude, in the same terms as at the feast of Pentecost. He declared the divine mission of Jesus: he asserted his resurrection: he affirmed that the miracle which they had just seen had been effected through his power. He again appealed to the prophets whose authority they professed to acknowledge, and adduced new passages in proof;² and he again concluded with inviting them to hear the call of God, first offered to their nation, and avert the punishment of their iniquities, by embracing the faith proposed to them.

Here, as before, the Apostle's words persuaded many of his hearers, who united themselves to the infant church.

But by this time the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, and of his resurrection from the dead, had excited jealousy. If it was true, the chiefs of the state, who had procured his condemnation, were most deeply involved in guilt. Therefore the discourses of the Apostles were interrupted by authority: they were themselves imprisoned; and on the following day strict inquiry was made of them in full council, "by

¹ Acts iii.

² Acts iii. 26.

what power or in what name" they had restored the cripple? The Apostles persevered in their declaration; affirmed that the cure which had occasioned such general surprise, had been performed through the power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom the rulers had crucified, and God had raised from the dead; and that it behoved them all to acknowledge him, as they valued the salvation of their souls.¹

Nothing can be more singular than the scene here delineated. On one part, the men in power, accustomed to command obedience, and the interpreters of the Mosaic law, whose authority had been paramount; these were now confronted by men of a despised district, silenced by quotations from their own Scriptures, and authoritatively taught what was essential to their salvation. We can readily comprehend their first impulse, to set down with a high hand these unknown and uneducated men: an impulse, however, which was restrained for a while by the presence of the man who had received the cure, which created a strong popular sensation: so that they could only venture, at this time, to stifle the business if possible, and forbid the new teachers to persist further in the doctrine which they were maintaining.

In defiance of this injunction, the Apostles declared that they had a divine command to promulgate these truths, and must continue to fulfil their mission.

¹ Acts iv.

And as the occasion did not allow of more open hostility, they were dismissed for the present with threats.

This warning, however, gave the Apostles good opportunity for deliberating on the nature of their undertaking. They now saw that their course was not a safe one; that they must look forward to opposition and suffering. There was still time to recede, if they chose to remain silent; but if they resolved to persevere, it could only be in defiance of authority, and at imminent personal risk. And what was their conduct? A solemn committal of their cause to God, whose agents they professed to be; and a devout entreaty that he would inspire them with holy courage, and support them with his power. "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings; and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus."¹

It is not necessary to detail particularly the further progress of the Apostles. Opposition grew more violent, and the consequences of their undertaking were sufficiently seen. They nevertheless continued to teach the Gospel both publicly and privately; and the number of converts was so greatly multiplied within a few months, that it became

¹ Acts iv. 29—31.

necessary to appoint officers for the management of their temporal concerns.

At length persecution in Jerusalem drove the converts into the various cities of Asia, to which they conveyed their new faith: confining themselves at first to their own countrymen; but afterwards, induced by the hostility with which these opposed them, they proceeded to address Jews and Gentiles indiscriminately.

And this change of plan supplies incidental occasion for a remarkable feature of internal evidence in the different tone and language which is used by the same persons, now described as appealing to heathen nations. We possess two circumstantial records of their first discourse to such assemblies, which bear the strongest marks of the qualities most important to their credit, honesty, and common sense. Those who had fabricated a history, would be likely to tell it always in the same tone. The language of the Apostles varied with their circumstances. To the Jews, as we saw, they appealed to things acknowledged by themselves and their countrymen in common, and laboured mainly to establish the point, that the crucified Jesus was the expected Messiah. But between the heathen and themselves there were no books to which they could refer, as to the Jewish Scriptures, held in mutual reverence; and before they proceeded to the more immediate object, the divinity of Jesus, it was necessary to lay down as a

foundation the existence and the unity of God, and his concern with the actions of mankind. So at Lystra,¹ where a miraculous cure had drawn the attention of the multitudes, and induced them to offer such honours to Paul and Barnabas as they had been used to pay to the deities of their polytheism: the Apostles seize on this as the groundwork of their address, and say: We claim no such adoration; "we also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and all things that are therein: who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

If we treat the Apostles as impostors, we must account for this honesty and moderation; if as enthusiasts, for their prudent forbearance.

The behaviour of Paul at Athens is no less characteristic. He is said to have gone thither without any previous purpose of seeking proselytes; but as he was waiting for two companions whom he had appointed to join him there, "his spirit was stirred up within him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry."² I may seem to assume the fact of his

¹ Acts xiv. 8, &c.

² Acts xvii. 16, &c.

sincerity and earnestness; but surely this is a most accurate description of the feeling of a man conscious that he was in possession of an important truth, which all around him were in want of; and too anxious for the welfare of his fellow-creatures to pass by any opportunity of enlightening them. "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears."

This passage affords a lively sketch of the Athenian agora and its frequenters, accustomed to perpetual discussions and agitating endless questions, with an utter indifference as to their truth or falsehood. Some entirely rejecting what they heard, "what will this babblers say?" Others struck with something imperfectly comprehended, and thinking it of sufficient consequence to be referred to the council of Areopagus.

We are next presented with the address of Paul to this assembly, opening with an ingenious allusion

to the altar inscribed, "To the unknown God;" and undertaking to set forth the Creator, who was at present strange to them, though convinced by their reason of the existence of some Supreme Being.

The condemnation of idolatry, and declaration of the truth which follows, is delivered in a tone of authority arising from the speaker's own confidence, which is beautifully blended with the compassion which he feels towards the ignorant and erring objects of his address. He speaks in that decisive strain of conscious superiority, which a Christian of the present day would adopt towards a tribe of Indians or Chinese. Yet who was the speaker? A stranger from an obscure province of Syria. Where was he speaking? In Athens, the instructress of the world. Whom was he addressing? The philosophers of highest repute in their age, to whom the wisest of other countries came for illumination.

He does not, however, launch at once into the mysteries of the faith which he professed. His mind is not so enthusiastically filled with the message of salvation which it was his office to convey, as to overlook the wisest method of imparting it. His object is, to prepare them to meet a future judgment: therefore he directs his blow towards their consciences and their fears. "The times of former ignorance God winked at; but now commands all men everywhere to repent; because he has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteous-

ness by that Man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all, in that he hath raised him again from the dead."¹

The effect of this novel declaration was the very effect to be anticipated from all that we know of human nature, and of that particular audience. When they found that his doctrine involved the question of the resurrection of the dead, a part ridiculed the idea: a part postponed the consideration of it; while some adhered to him, and "believed."²

¹ Acts xvii. 30, 31.

² He must have unusual confidence in the inventive powers of the early Christians, who can look upon these narratives, and the many others which are contained in the "Acts of the Apostles," as a mere fabrication: remembering, at the same time, the age to which the book indisputably belongs, and the persons by whom it must have been composed. When we consider the immense quantity of matter and the great variety of facts contained in it: the minute circumstances detailed: when we compare the speeches of Peter with those of Paul: and those of Paul to the Ephesians with those which he addressed to an unconverted audience: when we examine the conduct attributed to the Jews: their open persecution at Jerusalem, and their indirect accusation at Thessalonica; the ingenuity with which the adversaries of the Apostles address themselves to the passions and interests of men in the different cities: the characters of Gallio, of Felix, of Lysias, of Agrippa: it seems impossible to suppose this an invented narrative of things which never took place, or of persons who never had a real existence. This argument, indeed, can have no weight with a person who is not sensible of the air of truth and reality which pervades the whole history. But whoever is alive to this, whoever does perceive in almost every page the marks of a writer detailing the account of actual transactions and circumstances, should observe that the proof which arises from evidence of this kind, is not to be deemed far-fetched or imaginary, because it is incapable of being drawn out in words, or of being presented to the mind of the sceptic in any other way than by sending him to the books themselves.—See Paley's *Horæ Paulinæ*, Conclusion, p. 359.

Some believed. This is what requires explanation. How came any to give assent to such a fact as that affirmed by the Apostle, unless convincing evidence of his truth and divine commission were presented to them? What enabled Paul to prevail against that moral *vis inertiae* which so strongly retains mankind in their accustomed habits and the opinions of their country, unless he really could bring forward the proofs to which he appealed? How came he to establish his ground, in defiance of opposition, not for want of it: for the history proves that both Jews and Gentiles were no less decidedly attached to the religion, the traditions, and the worship of their ancestors, than ourselves.

We have advanced thus far. We have shown that the first preachers of Christianity achieved a most arduous undertaking: and we have argued that such success affords strong presumption of their bearing about with them sufficient evidence of divine authority. Two questions, however, arise, which demand consideration.

On the supposition of the facts being true which form the basis of Christianity, was such miraculous interference to be expected as might effect the sure, though gradual establishment of the religion? And was it to be expected that on such authority their religion should be partially, not universally, received?

With regard to the first of these questions, we may surely reply, that there was ground to expect divine interposition. The reason has been already anticipated: nothing else would have obtained for the Apostles an attentive hearing. Supposing, therefore, what it is not unreasonable to suppose, considering the state of the moral world at the period in question, that God had devised a plan for its melioration: it is also probable that he would authenticate it by such visible interpositions of his power as are said to have accompanied the ministry of Jesus and his Apostles. Because we cannot conceive that, without some co-operation of this kind, their preaching would have obtained any permanent attention, much less that it would have effected what it did ultimately effect, the conversion of the civilized world.¹

And this seems sufficient ground for believing, that if it were the purpose of God to establish a revelation like the Christian, he would see fit for a time to suspend or change the ordinary operations of his laws; and that in the case before us he actually did so.

¹ The cases of successful imposture or enthusiasm which sometimes astonish us, are no exception to this argument. Persons, such, for instance, as Swedenborg, do not introduce a new religion, but stand forward as interpreters of a religion before established on very different grounds; and because that is believed, they are listened to. If the religion were not already believed, these persons would gain no attention. The Apostles raised Christianity out of nothing, and against everything.

Here, however, an adversary steps in, and affirms that this exercise of miraculous power is too improbable to be credited on any testimony. It is contrary to the nature of the Deity, contrary to uniform experience, and refuted by the lessons of inductive philosophy, and, therefore, cannot be believed.

Whatever force may seem to be in this objection, a slight consideration will show that it carries us too far, and leads to consequences which a consistent Deist must hesitate to admit.

The argument stands thus. The laws of nature are fixed and uniform, being established by the Creator as the most suitable for the world he has made. To suppose that he would alter what he has once established, is to suppose mutability in his counsels, or imperfection in his laws. Therefore it is more probable that men should deceive or be deceived, than that he should have suffered that temporary change in the constitution of things which we call a miracle.

The most satisfactory answer to any abstract argument is that which can be drawn from matter of fact. In speaking of the Deity, more particularly, it is chiefly by considering what he has done, that we can safely decide what it may be consistent with his attributes to do. Have those writers who refuse to allow "any violation of the laws of matter, any modification in the existing condition of material agents, unless through the invariable operation of a series of

clearly expressed consequences, following in some necessary chain of orderly connexions"—have those writers ever seriously inquired of themselves how they account for the existence of those "material agents," and the "orderly connexion" which actually prevails? Because unless they adopt some of the ancient theories, and suppose the world to have been self-produced or eternal, they must allow that at some period, however distant or uncertain, a most important change did take place, that by a "modification of the pre-existing condition of material agents," that system was established under which we are now living. Whether it be termed *creation* or *production*, something was produced which did not exist before, or something before existing underwent important modification, unless we believe that our world had no Creator. And if we acknowledge a Creator, is it rational to suppose that when he gave to the world, as it now is, its form and being, he exhausted his Omnipotence, and reserved to himself no power of future interference; but said to the things that he had made, Such shall ye be, and no other?

It is not to do honour, as is pretended, to the wisdom of God, if we argue that it disparages his wisdom to suppose that he shall see reason to interfere with a system which he has himself ordained. Especially, when we take into consideration the object of

¹ Essays and Reviews, p. 133.

that interference. That which God saw fit to do for one purpose, he might see fit to do for another : for another, and not a less glorious purpose. For when we reflect on the difference which Christianity has already wrought in the moral world, and the still greater difference which it is calculated to work, and probably will effect in the progress of time, we cannot think it a less important exercise of power to have introduced the Gospel by suspending the laws which regulate the material world, than to have created the material world by first establishing them.

Unless, then, we banish from the universe the idea of God, and adopt some other principle to account for its existence, than its creation by a First Great Cause, we have no reason to believe it to be incompatible with the character of God to suspend the usual order of things.

Again, any argument must be founded on fallacy, which, if received, would render it impossible for God to reveal his will to mankind. But if there is justice in the assertion, that no testimony can warrant our belief in miracles, it is evident that we leave to God no assignable method of issuing any revelation. It would be rash to affirm absolutely that there could be no other method. Yet it is difficult to conceive in what other way could a messenger sent by him prove the authority of his mission. As was shown just now, who would believe a messenger on his mere

affirmation? We naturally demand such an authentication, as the question attributed to the Jews requires, "What sign showest thou?"¹ Men may be constrained to profess belief, and embrace a religion, as they were by the sword of Mohammed and his successors ; but they cannot be persuaded and convinced, except by some evidence which appeals to their reason, and satisfies their understanding.

It is further to be remarked, that before we decide so positively concerning the order of nature, the phenomena of the Jewish history must be taken into consideration. The wonders which are said to have attested the mission of Jesus and his Apostles took place among a people whose records contained repeated accounts of similar interference ; and who were accustomed to consider such signs as part of a system which God had established in order to preserve in their nation a belief in the Creator, and a knowledge of his will. Either the whole Jewish history must be given up as false, which would only shift our difficulty, without removing it ; or the Christian miracles form the last of a series of interpositions which God had constantly exercised with regard to that people. In this case they do not indicate the change, but the completion, of an uniform and regular scheme : a scheme which had been devised and kept in view from the beginning of things,

¹ John ii. 18.

and gradually brought to its accomplishment by the incarnation of Jesus: a plan which was shadowed out in a national law which had been observed for fifteen centuries; a plan which is intimated in the writings of numerous authors spread over the surface of that long period; writings abounding with passages that received their first and only explanation in the character and history of Jesus.

Therefore, to the employment of miracles, as a part of the divine government, the whole Jewish people bear witness. Not merely the people of one age, but of a series of ages. Miracles made them what they were, an exception to the general state of the world, in religion, in laws, in customs, in morals. And experience like this has a claim to be considered, when we talk of experience, and draw our conclusions. We are not at liberty to assert that miracles are contrary to all experience, when the experience of a whole nation attests them, and when that attestation is confirmed by phenomena which, except on the supposition of miracles, we have no means of explaining.

The purport of the foregoing reflections is, not to prove the truth of the miracles related in the narratives of the Apostles, which belongs to a different course of argument; but to dispose the mind to receive that external evidence which does confirm them; and which establishes the divinity of Jesus from the miracles which he wrought, and enabled

his followers to work. The idea must not be rejected as incredible, that the Apostles were endued with the faculty of speaking various languages for the purpose of communicating instruction, which otherwise could never have been imparted; or that they were supernaturally enabled to conciliate attention and favour by acts of mercy and of power. On the contrary, it appears probable, that if the religion were really divine, they would have been entrusted with such gifts. Because without them, they would in vain have attempted to withdraw the Jews from their ritual, or the heathen from their idolatry.¹ It savours of atheism to exclude God from all concern with the world, of which he is acknowledged to be the Creator. True, we do not now experience his interposition. Neither do we perceive it in the direction of the natural world. But he did interpose in the natural world, when he

¹ The difficulties which the first teachers of Christianity would have universally to encounter, are well set forth by Dr. Hey, b. i. ch. xviii. s. 6. "Nothing less than being present at the different scenes which attended the propagation of Christianity, would give us a perfect conception of this interesting subject. We should see the magnificence of the heathen temples, the fine workmanship of the statues, the priests, the victims, superbly adorned, the attendant youths of both sexes, &c. &c.; we should observe how every part of religion was contrived to allure and captivate; we should see how all men were attached to it, not only of the lower ranks, but the most improved and the best informed: for we, in our improved times, are apt to think Jupiter, Apollo, and Venus, so absurd as deities, that we have no idea or feeling of the attachment of the heathens to their gods."

established that order of things which we call the laws of nature. And so in respect of religion. He manifested himself openly till he had completed the full revelation of his will, and now leaves that revelation to work its effect upon the world without the further operation of his visible power.

2. The second question alluded to, as an argument against the reality of the Christian miracles, still remains to be noticed; the inflexible obstinacy of the ruling party among the Jews, and, indeed, of the great mass of the nation. Was it to be expected, that in the face of such evidence there should be any unbelief? that the religion should be only partially received? Who could withhold assent, when the most astonishing miracles were exhibited before their eyes?

In reply to this, we should observe, that it is an error to set the Christians against the Jews, and the Jews against the Christians, as a body. The preaching of the Apostles made the Jews a divided body; and the majority of the earliest Christians were, in fact, converted Jews. The conversion of one part removes the objection arising from the obduracy of the other. For what account can be given of that conversion, if the whole history is untrue? Whereas the unbelief of the greater number is sufficiently explained on the known principles of human nature.

We need not go far for an exemplification. We look around, and see a community calling itself Christian; and though a few may confess their scepticism, the majority would indignantly repel the insinuation that they disbelieve the Gospel. Yet how few, how very few, comparatively, act in consistency with their profession, or live conformably with the Christian faith? Not because they are convinced that it does not deserve to be believed, but because it interferes with their pleasures, or their habits, or their prejudices, and therefore they pass it over with a notice too inconsiderable to be acted upon. On similar grounds it is easy to understand the conduct of the Jews. When we remember the confession of personal guilt, which their acknowledgment of Jesus as the Messiah must have implied: the complete sacrifice of worldly advantages which it required: the prejudices to be renounced; the passions to be overcome; and further, when we add to this the obligations which it would have imposed upon them, the change of personal conduct which it demanded, to which they had the same repugnance as all other men; we shall perceive, I think, that national confession would have been an act of national repentance little to be expected from their character as a people, or from the nature of mankind in general.

Where there is a strong indisposition to believe,

pretexts for not believing are readily discovered. The history of Jesus acquaints us that the persons in authority drew the attention of their countrymen from the miracles on pretence of their being wrought through the agency of evil spirits. The prejudices of some rendered them unwilling to receive him as the Messiah; the habits of others disinclined them to listen to his doctrines; and this set them upon seeking for an explanation of the supernatural power, which they could not but acknowledge. They found one, which, however frivolous it may appear to us, at least gives the opinion of that age and nation. This solution was as satisfactory to them as that of magic to those among the heathen, who paid sufficient attention to the Christian story to know what it contained. The early apologists themselves assure us, that this consideration prevented them from alleging the miracles of Jesus as their strongest argument:¹ they laid far greater stress upon the prophecies; and their choice in this matter, however unwise it may appear to us, seems justified by the ease with which Celsus thinks that he has disposed of all difficulty, when he has attributed the Christian miracles to a skilful use of magic.² People are easily satisfied when they are willing to

¹ Justin Mart. Apol. i. ch. xxxvii.

² See, on this subject, Watson's Letters to Gibbon, page 147, &c.

be deceived; and a vague reference to such an explanation, though quite as insufficient to an honest inquirer then, as the plea of witchcraft to an enlightened philosopher now, might be enough to divert attention, and resist the first weak impressions of conscientious conviction. Particularly when a powerful array of immediate interests opposed the strength of evidence, and fortified the prejudices naturally entertained by the votaries and priests of an expiring religion.¹

The case of Paul illustrates these remarks. Without assuming that he was convinced by a miracle immediately affecting himself, we may argue that he was convinced, and from an enemy became a zealous partisan; from a Jewish persecutor a Christian confessor. Long after his conversion he speaks indirectly of the state of mind under which he had acted; which was no other than that foretold by Jesus, when men should go about to slay his disciples, and think that they were "doing God service."² He "did it ignorantly, in unbelief;" that is, he was so blinded by prejudice that he could

¹ Much more might be said upon these points; but the question has been so fully and so ably treated, both by Paley and Chalmers, that no reader, I imagine, can require further satisfaction than he may meet with in those writers, respecting either the neglect of the heathen philosophers, or the unbelief of the Jews.—See Paley, Part iii. ch. iv.; Chalmers's Evid. ch. v.

² 1 Tim. i. 13.

not discern the truth ; and though he had become too well instructed to think such prejudice innocent, he attributes it to this cause, that God had mercifully pardoned and enlightened him.

We must not, at any rate, allow an objection to divert our minds from the undisputed fact, that a considerable body of the Jewish nation was persuaded to exchange the religion to which they had been attached with proverbial zeal, for a religion which opposed all their sentiments, disappointed all their expectations, and compromised all their exclusive privileges. Now, from our experience of the human mind, we can in some measure understand how a part of the nation might obstinately resist evidence which convinced the rest : but on no experience whatever can we understand how a single individual should have been converted, without that very evidence to which their conversion is ascribed in the history. And the result of the whole is, that, in the account which we have received of the first propagation of Christianity, there is nothing inconsistent with what we know of the human heart, its prejudices, associations, and tendencies;—supposing that the facts were true ; supposing that such a person as Jesus had been really foretold by a series of prophets ; supposing that he had indeed risen from the dead ; and supposing that the miracles appealed to had been actually performed. On any

other supposition the whole case becomes altogether inexplicable, and the progress of the religion a problem without parallel in the history of mankind.