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**The Works Of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John,  
Lord Viscount Bolingbroke**

In Five Volumes, complete.

**Bolingbroke, Henry St. John**

**London, 1754**

XXI.

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effected his purposes without contradicting his spirit. We may believe any thing sooner than this, that immutability admits of change; and yet we must admit both the contradiction and the change, if we give entire credit to all that we find related, and as it stands related, in the books of the old Testament.

## XXI.

I HAVE quoted from father SIMON, in one of my Letters\* to my lord CORNBURY, a divine of the faculty of Paris, who held that the authenticity of these books, and divine inspiration of their authors, should be understood to extend no further than to matters purely of doctrine, or to such as have a necessary connection with these. Upon the same and even a stronger principle of reason, we may assert that as the sacred writers have no claim to inspiration, when they write on other subjects; so neither have they when they write any thing on these which is evidently inconsistent with right reason, in matters that are proper objects of reason, and with the first principles of natural law, which are at the same time the first principles of christianity. What the french divine advanced, and what I have advanced here, will be treated as an impious paradox by some of those trifling solemn dogmatists in criticism and theology, who have advanced so many absurd and impious, really impious, paradoxes of their own. But let us see, in the present case, on whose side the paradox and the impiety lie. I say that the law of nature is the law of God. Of this I have the same demonstrative knowledge, that I have of the existence of God, the all-perfect Being. I say that the all-perfect Being cannot contradict himself; that he would

\* Let. III.

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contradict himself if the laws contained in the thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, to mention no others here, were his laws, since they contradict those of nature, and therefore that they are not his laws. Of all this I have as certain, as intuitive knowledge, as I have that two and two are equal to four, or that the whole is bigger than a part. From these indisputable premises I conclude, that all those expressions in the text, which ascribe these laws to God, are uninspired, perhaps interpolated, but undoubtedly false. What now does the dogmatist do? He begs the question, and he pretends to demonstrate. His premises are precarious, and his conclusion is a paradox. He imputes, directly, to the author of nature, what he is forced to own unjust and cruel, according to the laws of nature; and he pretends to justify the all-perfect Being, whom he has thus accused, by inconclusive and sophistical arguments.

I HAVE touched this point above; but since I recollect that Mr. LOCKE has insisted on a solution of the difficulty, which, I think, and am not afraid to call inconclusive and sophistical, it is worth my while to bestow a few more words upon it. There is a respect due even to the mistakes of that great man, the respect I mean of giving a reason for not submitting to his authority, which I would not pay to every dull commentator, nor frothy declaimer that should argue like him, or from him. We know, from some of his writings, how easily he received every hypothesis that favored, or that seemed to favor, the authenticity of the Jewish scriptures, notwithstanding all he said in his chapter of probability; and Mr. COSTE, the translator of his famous essay, who knew him well, accounted for this, and some other contradictions, by a strange timidity of temper, which made him often waver in his own abstract philosophical notions, when he came to apply them to any of his

his religious prejudices. He believed, on very insufficient authority, that the one true God was known to the Jews alone, and that the rest of mankind were polytheists and idolaters from the beginning. Thus he might receive too some other theological assumptions: this, for instance, as presumptuous and impertinent as it is, to assign the sufficient reason that infinite wisdom had for doing in one manner what infinite power might have done in several, "that it was necessary God should separate a chosen people from the rest of mankind, in order to preserve among mankind the knowledge of himself in his unity:" or this, that "the choice fell on the Israelites not for their own merit," since no nation upon earth could have less towards God or man, but, "for the merit of their forefathers," of ABRAHAM famous in the east, the patriarch of the Arabians as well as of the Jews, of ISAAC his son, and of JACOB his grandson, of whom it is said in the scriptures, that they were preferred in the womb to ISMAEL and to ESAU, without assigning any apparent reason for this preference, since they could have no personal merit so early, and the reason of which must have been therefore this, that the Israelites were to descend from them; which looks as if the fathers were chosen for the sake of the sons, rather than the sons for the sake of the fathers. Mr. LOCKE, who could embrace such hypotheses as these, might easily assume, as he did assume, that "in order to keep up this separation, and to secure the effects of it, the Supreme Being submitted to be not only the tutelary deity of this people, as he had been of their fathers, and to make a covenant with them, but to be their local deity, and even literally as much their king as their God."

THAT he was such a king, Mr. LOCKE asserted, and on that assertion he distinguished between the mosaical, and all other laws,

laws, in his letter concerning toleration. By the former, idolaters were to be rooted out, he says; but the former is not obligatory on Christians, and therefore urged by intolerants very absurdly in favor of persecution. The Jewish commonwealth, different from all others, was an absolute theocracy; no difference could be made between that commonwealth and the church; religious laws were the civil laws of that people, and part of their political government, in which God himself was the legislator. The citizens, therefore, of that commonwealth, who apostatized, were proceeded against as traitors and rebels, guilty of no less than high treason. Let it be so. The objections of injustice and cruelty to these laws will remain in their full force, and be of more weight to prove them human, than all these hypotheses to prove them divine. God was king, and idolatry was no less than high treason; no objection therefore can lie against the punishment of it. None certainly, but every objection to the manner, and degree in which this punishment was to be inflicted, stands good; for if we can believe God to have been a king, we can never believe him to have been such a king as he is described, nor to have given such laws as MOSES gave in his name. Is it not enough to reduce, in our notions, the Supreme Being to the state of an earthly monarch, unless we degrade the all-perfect Being, in them, to the character of an unjust and cruel tyrant, who authorized, and even commanded his ministers expressly to punish without measure, without discernment, and without forms of justice? Can it be obligatory on a Christian to believe this which Mr. LOCKE believed? Surely not; no more than to believe that it is obligatory on him at this day, to punish heretics by virtue of these laws, which opinion Mr. LOCKE disclaimed, and against which he wrote this very treatise.

I NEED not take notice of the indulgence which Mr. LOCKE observes, to the honor of the mosaical law, was shewn by it to strangers. The observation is not strictly within my subject; for I never affirmed, that all the laws of MOSES were repugnant to the law of nature. But what was this indulgence? Strangers were not compelled by force, and on pain of death, to embrace judaism, nor were the Israelites commanded to exterminate the Moabites, and other foreign nations, unless they renounced their idolatry. The task might have been too hard for the chosen people, and they did not want, at that time, any more land than that of the seven nations. If they had wanted more, they would have soon had a law to take it, and to exterminate the rightful possessors, as they had a promise, and a law which authorised them to conquer and destroy the Canaanites. Mr. LOCKE, indeed, adds another reason for this destruction. God had chosen Canaan for his kingdom, as well as the Israelites for his subjects, and he could not suffer the adoration of any other deity in his kingdom, tho, in fact, other deities continued to be adored there, with or without the consent of his people. More reflections on the manner of stating facts, as well as of arguing, may be made; but these are more than enough, to shew in one instance more, and by the way, into how low a form the greatest writers fall, when they attempt to reconcile to common sense, or common honesty, many passages of traditions inconsistent with both. The Jews, or the penmen of these traditions, had so little of either, that they represent sometimes a patriarch like JACOB, and sometimes a saint like DAVID, by characters that can belong to none but the very worst of men. Can we be surprised, then, that they ascribed to the all-perfect Being, on various occasions, such a conduct, and such laws as are inconsistent with his most obvious perfections? Can we believe such a conduct, and such laws,

laws, to have been his, on the word of the proudest and most lying nation of the world?

MANY other considerations, some of which have been occasionally mentioned, in what I have writ to you, might have their place here. But I shall confine myself to one, which I do not remember to have seen, nor heard urged on one side, nor anticipated on the other. To shew then, the more evidently, how absurd, as well as impious, it is to ascribe these mosaical laws to God, let it be considered, that neither the people of Israel, nor their legislator perhaps, knew any thing of another life, wherein the crimes committed in this life are to be punished; altho he might have learned this doctrine, which was not so much a secret doctrine as it may be presumed that the unity of the Supreme God was, among the Egyptians. Whether he had learned both, or either, or neither of them in those schools, cannot be determined; but this may be advanced with assurance. If MOSES knew that crimes, and therefore idolatry, one of the greatest, were to be punished in another life, he deceived the people in the covenant they made by his intervention with God. If he did not know it, I say it with horror, the consequence, according to the hypothesis I oppose, must be, that God deceived both him and them. In either case, a covenant or bargain was made, wherein the conditions of obedience and disobedience were not fully, nor by consequence fairly stated. The Israelites had better things to hope, and worse to fear, than those that were expressed in it; and their whole history seems to shew how much need they had of these additional motives, to restrain them from polytheism and idolatry, and to answer the assumed purposes of divine providence.