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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

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XXXIX.

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with the vanity of their own hearts, they could not have been forced from it. But when they had once engaged in platonic and aristotelical reasonings about christian mysteries, it was too late to go back. They might cry as loudly as they pleased, which they always did when they were pinched, that the judgments and ways of God were acatalepta, incomprehensible; but this cry came with an ill grace from them. It could have no effect on their adversaries. They might have made it a cry of triumph. They made it little better than a confession of defeat: and such it has continued ever since.

XXXIX.

IF I intended to proceed any further than CLARKE leads me on this occasion, I might consider in many more instances, taken from the writings of other divines, and of the fathers of the church, the manner in which they employ reason to account for revelation, sometimes literally, sometimes allegorically, always presumptuously, often ridiculously. To collect all the prophane nonsense that has been broached about Eve and the serpent, about the trees of life and knowledge, and about other circumstances of the creation and fall of man, which the curiosity of the woman, the wiles of the serpent, and the uxorious complaisance of Adam effected, would be to collect an immense volume of all that has been writ on these subjects by Jews and christians; for all that has been writ upon them is alike absurd. To run through all those passages of the Old Testament, which are lessons of public and private immorality, of immodesty to women, and of sanguinary ferocity to men, which leave us no room to be surpris'd when we hear that there were certain heretics, who thought the God of the Old Testament was not the God of the New, and which shew
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that they who compiled the written law, from ESDRAS to SIMON the just, had as little discernment in the choice of their materials, as they who compiled the traditions of the oral law afterwards; both of which demonstrate that notions the most unworthy of God, and the most repugnant to the law of human nature, prevailed among the Jews in every age, tho they were reconciled in their minds to some very sublime sentiments, and very true opinions; to run through all this, I say, would be not only tedious, but shocking to a man who considered these passages seriously, even to him, perhaps, who had heard them read solemnly a thousand times in his parish-church without being offended at them. Such is the force of habit which familiarises the grossest absurdities to our reason, as it does the most disagreeable sensations to our senses.

TYPES, and figures, and prophecies are subjects on which the acute wits of divines have been much exercised, in order to shew a connection between the Old Testament and the New, and how one prepares us for and foretells the other. I shall descend into few particulars concerning them. There is no room for reasoning about the two former. Their propriety or impropriety, aptness or unaptness, must appear to the understanding as soon as they are compared with the things typified or figured. Thus, for example, and to mention no other, when St. AUSTIN* tells us, that the ark being made of wood, and having a length, an height and breadth, which answer to the proportions of the human body, and, therefore, signify a human body, it is plain that this vessel prefigured the city of God, or the church, which is saved by that wood, on which

* Mensura ipsa longitudinis, altitudinis, latitudinisque ejus significat corpus humanum quae sit salva per lignum in quo pependit homo JESUS CHRISTUS. Praenunciatus est venturus, et venit. de Civ. Dei L. 15.

the man JESUS CHRIST was hanged up; that his coming was foretold, and he came; the impropriety and unaptness of this type or figure must strike you on the very first reflection.

MORE reasoning and a longer process of examination are necessary when prophecies are concerned. The meaning of them is always equivocal and obscure, and it may be doubtful sometimes whether things were done, or recorded to be done, because they had been, or seemed to have been foretold; or whether they had been foretold, because they were to come to pass. Of prophecies we have store, both of such as are applied to the Messiah, of such as foretold what was to happen immediately to him, and to Jerusalem, and of such as remain and must remain, till the consummation of all things, unaccomplished. I shall not set my feet into this labyrinth, where nothing certain is to be found, and from whence it is not easy to get out. I shall be content to observe that many questions are unresolved, many difficulties unremoved, concerning the first kind of prophecies; and that men, even inspired men, have thought sometimes that they discovered prophecies, when they made them, and made them such as could not be maintained with all the learning and all the subtilty they have bestowed about them. It was for this reason, I suppose, that CLARKE omitted modestly the famous prophecy, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son," in the place where he enumerates those that foretold the Messiah; tho he was sanguine enough to insist on some of no less difficult application, as that "the sceptre shall not depart from Judah till SHILOH comes;" and on others that have had no accomplishment, as that in the Psalms, that God would "give him the heathen for his inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth for his possession," which is become by the event more applicable to FOE or MAHOMET, than to the true Messiah.

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It may not be out of our way to observe here, that as the vague undetermined sense, and the ambiguous dark expression of the Bible have led sacred writers and others to suppose prophecies, applicable to CHRIST, where none such were intended; so the mahometan doctors have taken this advantage to assume that their false prophet is plainly promised, both in the old and new covenant. They quote the text in Deuteronomy, where it is said, that the Lord came, or manifested himself, from Sinai, and rose up from Seir*, that he shined forth from mount Paran. In this passage they find the law given to MOSES, the Gospel to JESUS CHRIST, and the Koran to MAHOMET; and this they support by topographical proofs. Seir is, according to them, that extent of hills, which run from the Red to the Dead Sea, close to Jerusalem. Paran is that mountain in the desert of Arabia, near to Mecca, where MAHOMET received the first chapters of his impertinent book. I wonder these commentators have not observed further, that from the Lord's right hand there went a firey law for them. This epithet could never be more properly applied. Your HOMER alludes to fire in his descriptions of battles. The devastations of war are compared by other poets to those of fire; and the mahometan law might be called firey at least, as well as the mosaical. These doctors bring two other quotations from the Psalms. The first is in our translation, out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shined †. In the syriac they say, it is God hath made a crown of glory to shine out of Zion, and they add, that the words, rendered crown of glory, are in the original Hilan Mahmudan, by which the passage would be made to signify, God has sent the domination of MAHOMET with splendor out of Zion. The second is taken

* C. 33. v. 2.

† Ps. 50. v. 2.

from

from the Pfalm, which is called the Pfalm of SOLOMON*, and which describes in the future tense all the glories of his reign. This our divines agree, to be so; but having assumed, no one knows why, that SOLOMON was a type of the Messiah, they assert, that the prophecy looks forward to the spiritual reign of CHRIST, and that, sometimes one and sometimes the other is meant with a strange confusion of images. The mahometan doctors fix the sense of it by asserting, against Jews and christians both, that the arabic version employs the proper and usual word Medina, where it is said, that they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth: after which they ask, with an air of triumph, what other prophet, besides MAHOMET, ever came out of Medina, or even of Arabia? They go further, and they assume, that CHRIST himself foretold the coming of MAHOMET, when he said, that, if he did not go, the Paraclet would not come; but that when he did go, he would send him †. They pretend, that this passage was still more honorable for their prophet, that CHRIST spoke of himself in it as of the precursor of MAHOMET, and that it has been corrupted. But still the prophecy, they say, is sufficiently clear, since Paraclet is in arabic Ahmed, and since Ahmed or Mahammed are the same.

ALL that has been said concerning attempts to explain, and enforce revelation by reason, relates to internal proofs, as they are called, of the divine original of the scriptures. CLARKE, whom I follow, does not think fit to insist on any external proofs, on such as might establish beyond all reasonable doubt the antiquity, the genuineness, and the authority of the books themselves||: and yet the least grain of such proof as this would outweigh all the volumes of problema-

* Pf. 72.

† St. John 16. v. 12.

|| Evid. p. 269.

tical

tical and futile reasoning, that has been so tediously employed to give some color to the other. He refers us indeed to the collection that we find in GROTIUS*, of many particulars contained in sacred, and confirmed by prophane history. But GROTIUS and he should have seen, that every one else would see the fallacy of this pretended proof. The concurrent testimony of cotemporary, disinterested and unprejudiced authors is, no doubt, a principal foundation of the credibility of any history: and such a testimony these men would have it thought that they produce, when they quote, with much pomp, Egyptian, Phoenician, Chaldean, Indian, and Greek traditions and histories. But none of these were of such authority; or if the most ancient of them, such as SANCHONIATHON for instance, and even others more modern like BEROSUS, or ABYDENUS, or ERATOSTHENES, or MANETHO, were disinterested and unprejudiced in their history and chronology; yet is it certain that they, by whom alone these testimonies are conveyed to us, were so little of that character, JOSEPHUS and EUSEBIUS for instance, that their design in writing, however they blundered sometimes in the execution of it, was to make prophane chronology and history appear conformable to those of the Bible at any rate. That they did so, every scholar knows in some instances, which makes their authority justly precarious in every instance of this kind. But I am willing to suppose, that these impure channels are pure, and that they have conveyed these anecdotes down to us just as they stood in the antient books, from which they are said to be taken. What will this concession prove? It will prove, that there were various traditions, in a most remote antiquity, concerning the creation, the flood, and the destruction of Sodom, about ABRAHAM and other patriarchs,

* De Verit. Rel. Christ.

about

about DAVID and other kings of the Jews. It will shew, that the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Israelites, and probably every one of the eastern nations, had their systems of traditions, whereof that of the Old Testament alone is come down to us entire. The same names, and many circumstances of the same events must of course have been mentioned in all. But such a conformity proves nothing. As they agreed in some, they might differ in other particulars: and the whole tenor of those, that are lost, might be repugnant to one another, and to that of the Jews. ABRAHAM was a name famous in all of them. ISAAC was known to the Arabians as well as ISMAEL, and ISMAEL to the Jews as well as ISAAC; but they tell very different stories about the legitimacy, and rank, and favor with God of the two brothers, as well as about the descent from them. In one of these, we find a genealogy down to CHRIST. In the other the Mahometans find a genealogy of all those who were born with the signs of a prophet down to MAHOMET. I could set the fallacy of this sort of proof, in general and in particular, as it is applied both to the Old Testament and to the New, in a stronger light; if I did not hasten back from this digression to that which is more immediately my subject, in order to shew you a further abuse of this manner of reasoning, on which the absurd pile of artificial theology has been erected, and is supported. The abuse, I mean, is that whereby divines admit the first, the most plausible and the strongest objection that atheism ever made to the existence of God; form a sort of partial alliance with the professors of it, and assist them in undermining the fundamental article of all religion, which they hope vainly to maintain afterwards by the help of a few hypothetical props. This abuse does not arise solely from the presumption which has been spoken of, the presumption of those who think, that the christian revelation wants to lean on human reason, and to be explained

explained and enforced by it; but from a false reasoning, in which philosophers have indulged their pride, and their curiosity, ever since their was such a thing as philosophy in the world. Let us descend into a particular consideration of this matter, and speak of it a little at large.

XL.

AFTER pleading the cause of natural and revealed religion, I am now to plead that of God himself, if I may use the expression of *SENECA*, in his treatise *De Providentia*, against divines and atheists in confederacy.

THAT chain of reasoning by which we arrive, from a knowledge of the Phaenomena, at a knowledge of the author of nature, of a first intelligent cause of all things, self-existent and the fountain of all existence, all-perfect, and the inimitable original of all perfections, has never been, and can never be broken. How should reason dissolve a demonstration reason has made, by leading us from things perceived by sense and by intuition to that existence which cannot be so perceived*? The atheist cannot be said properly to argue against the most evident, and in my apprehension, the most comfortable truth, which human reason demonstrates. All he can do is to cavil at it: and thus far the association, between him and the thief, has been carried too generally in all ages.

IGNORANCE that was real, and knowledge that was fantastical, superstition and philosophy combined to create gods,

* Ratio quae ex rebus perceptis ad id quod non percipiebatur aducit. Acad. Quaest. L. 2.