



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

In Five Volumes, complete.

**Bolingbroke, Henry St. John**

**London, 1754**

Letter III. 1. An objection against the utility of history removed. 2. The false and true aims of those who study it. 3. Of the history of the first ages, with reflections on the state of ancient ...

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OF THE  
S T U D Y of H I S T O R Y.

## L E T T E R III.

1. An objection against the utility of history removed.
2. The false and true aims of those who study it.
3. Of the history of the first ages, with reflections on the state of ancient history prophane and sacred.

WERE these letters to fall into the hands of some ingenious persons who adorn the age we live in, your lordship's correspondent would be joked upon for his project of improving men in virtue and wisdom by the study of history. The general characters of men, it would be said, are determined by their natural constitutions, as their particular actions are by immediate objects. Many very conversant in history would be cited, who have proved ill men, or bad politicians; and a long roll would be produced of others, who have arrived at a great pitch of private, and public virtue, without any assistance of this kind. Something has been said already to anticipate this objection; but, since I have heard several persons affirm such propositions with great confidence, a loud laugh, or a silent sneer at the pedants who presumed to think otherwise; I will spend a few paragraphs, with your lordship's leave, to shew that such affirmations, for to affirm amongst these



these fine men is to reason, either prove too much, or prove nothing.

IF our general characters were determined absolutely, as they are certainly influenced, by our constitutions, and if our particular actions were so by immediate objects; all instruction by precept, as well as example, and all endeavors to form the moral character by education, would be unnecessary. Even the little care that is taken, and surely it is impossible to take less, in the training up our youth, would be too much. But the truth is widely different from this representation of it; for, what is vice, and what is virtue? I speak of them in a large and philosophical sense. The former is, I think, no more than the excess, abuse, and misapplication of appetites, desires, and passions, natural and innocent, nay useful and necessary. The latter consists in the moderation and government, in the use and application of these appetites, desires, and passions, according to the rules of reason, and therefore often in opposition to their own blind impulse.

WHAT now is education? that part, that principal and most neglected part of it, I mean, which tends to form the moral character? It is, I think, an institution designed to lead men from their tender years, by precept and example, by argument and authority, to the practice, and to the habit of practising these rules. The stronger our appetites, desires, and passions are, the harder indeed is the task of education: but when the efforts of education are proportioned to this strength, altho our keenest appetites and desires, and our ruling passions cannot be reduced to a quiet and uniform submission, yet, are not their excesses asswaged? are not their abuses and misapplications, in some degree, diverted or checked? Tho the pilot cannot lay the storm, cannot he carry the ship,



ship, by his art, better through it, and often prevent the wreck that would always happen, without him? If ALEXANDER who loved wine, and was naturally choleric, had been bred under the severity of Roman discipline, it is probable he would neither have made a bonfire of Persepolis for his whore, nor have killed his friend. If SCIPIO, who was naturally given to women, for which anecdote we have, if I mistake not, the authority of POLYBIUS, as well as some verses of NÆVIUS preserved by A. GELLIUS, had been educated by OLYMPIAS at the court of PHILIP, it is improbable that he would have restored the beautiful Spaniard. In short, if the renowned SOCRATES had not corrected nature by art, this first apostle of the gentiles had been a very profligate fellow, by his own confession; for he was inclined to all the vices ZOPYRUS imputed to him, as they say, on the observation of his physiognomy.

WITH him therefore, who denies the effects of education, it would be in vain to dispute; and with him who admits them, there can be dispute, concerning that share which I ascribe to the study of history, in forming our moral characters, and making us better men. The very persons who pretend that inclinations cannot be restrained, nor habits corrected, against our natural bent, would be the first perhaps to prove, in certain cases, the contrary. A fortune at court, or the favors of a lady, have prevailed on many to conceal, and they could not conceal without restraining, which is one step towards correcting, the vices they were by nature addicted to the most. Shall we imagine now, that the beauty of virtue and the deformity of vice, the charms of a bright and lasting reputation, the terror of being delivered over as criminals to all posterity, the real benefit arising from a conscientious discharge of the duty we owe to others, which benefit fortune can neither



ther hinder nor take away, and the reasonableness of conforming ourselves to the designs of God manifested in the constitution of the human nature; shall we imagine, I say, that all these are not able to acquire the same power over those who are continually called upon to a contemplation of them, and they who apply themselves to the study of history are so called upon, as other motives, mean and fordid in comparison of these, can usurp on other men?

2. THAT the study of history, far from making us wiser, and more useful citizens, as well as better men, may be of no advantage whatsoever; that it may serve to render us mere antiquaries and scholars; or that it may help to make us forward coxcombs, and prating pedants, I have already allowed. But this is not the fault of history: and to convince us that it is not, we need only contrast the true use of history with the use that is made of it by such men as these. We ought always to keep in mind, that history is philosophy teaching by examples how to conduct ourselves in all the situations of private and public life; that therefore we must apply ourselves to it in a philosophical spirit and manner; that we must rise from particular to general knowledge, and that we must fit ourselves for the society and business of mankind by accustoming our minds to reflect and meditate on the characters we find described, and the course of events we find related there. Particular examples may be of use sometimes in particular cases; but the application of them is dangerous. It must be done with the utmost circumspection, or it will be seldom done with success. And yet one would think that this was the principal use of the study of history, by what has been written on the subject. I know not whether MACHIAVEL himself is quite free from defect on this account: he seems to carry the use and application of particular examples sometimes too far. MARIUS



and CATULUS passed the Alpes, met, and defeated the Cimbri beyond the frontiers of Italy. Is it safe to conclude from hence, that whenever one people is invaded by another, the invaded ought to meet and fight the invaders at a distance from their frontiers? MACHIAVEL's countryman, GUICCIARDIN, was aware of the danger that might arise from such an application of examples. PETER of Medicis had involved himself in great difficulties, when those wars and calamities began which LEWIS SFORZA first drew and entailed on Italy, by flattering the ambition of CHARLES the eighth in order to gratify his own, and calling the French into that country. PETER owed his distress to his folly in departing from the general tenor of conduct his father LAURENCE had held, and hoped to relieve himself by imitating his father's example in one particular instance. At a time when the wars with the pope and king of Naples had reduced LAURENCE to circumstances of great danger, he took the resolution of going to FERDINAND, and of treating in person with that prince. The resolution appears in history imprudent and almost desperate: were we informed of the secret reasons on which this great man acted, it would appear very possibly a wise and safe measure. It succeeded, and LAURENCE brought back with him public peace, and private security. As soon as the French troops entered the dominions of Florence, PETER was struck with a panic terror, went to CHARLES the eighth, put the port of Leghorn, the fortresses of Pisa, and all the keys of the country, into this prince's hands; whereby he disarmed the Florentine commonwealth, and ruined himself. He was deprived of his authority, and driven out of the city, by the just indignation of the magistrates, and people: and in the treaty which they made afterwards with the king of France, it was stipulated, that PETER should not remain within an hundred miles of the state, nor his brothers within the same distance of the city of Florence.

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On this occasion GUICCIARDIN observes, how dangerous it is to govern ourselves by particular examples; since to have the same success, we must have the same prudence, and the same fortune; and since the example must not only answer the case before us in general, but in every minute circumstance. This is the sense of that admirable historian, and these are his words -----“*é senza dubbio molto pericoloso il governarsi con gl' esempi, se non concorrono, non solo in generale, ma in tutti i particolari, le medesime ragioni; se le cose non sono regolate con la medesima prudenza, & se oltre a tutti li altri fondamenti, non, v'ha la parte sua la medesima fortuna.*”

An observation that BOILEAU makes, and a rule he lays down in speaking of translations, will properly find their place here, and serve to explain still better what I would establish. “To translate servilely into modern language an ancient author phrase by phrase, and word by word, is preposterous: nothing can be more unlike the original than such a copy. It is not to shew, it is to disguise the author: and he who has known him only in this dress, would not know him in his own. A good writer, instead of taking this inglorious and unprofitable task upon him, will joust contre l'original, rather imitate than translate, and rather emulate than imitate: he will transfuse the sense and spirit of the original into his own work, and will endeavour to write as the ancient author would have wrote, had he writ in the same language.” Now, to improve by examples is to improve by imitation. We must catch the spirit, if we can, and conform ourselves to the reason of them; but we must not affect to translate servilely into our conduct, if your lordship will allow me the expression, the particular conduct of those good and great men, whose images history sets before us. CODRUS and the DECII devoted themselves to death: one, because an oracle had foretold that the army whose general was

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killed would be victorious; the others in compliance with a superstition that bore great analogy to a ceremony practised in the old Egyptian church, and added afterwards, as many others of the same origin were, to the ritual of the Israelites. These are examples of great magnanimity, to be sure, and of magnanimity employed in the most worthy cause. In the early days of the Athenian and Roman government, when the credit of oracles and all kinds of superstition prevailed, when heaven was piously thought to delight in blood, and even human blood was shed under wild notions of atonement, propitiation, purgation, expiation, and satisfaction; they who set such examples as these, acted an heroic and a rational part too. But if a general should act the same part now, and, in order to secure his victory, get killed as fast as he could; he might pass for an hero, but, I am sure, he would pass for a madman. Even these examples, however, are of use: they excite us at least to venture our lives freely in the service of our country, by proposing to our imitation men who devoted themselves to certain death in the service of theirs. They shew us what a turn of imagination can operate, and how the greatest trifle, nay the greatest absurdity, dressed up in the solemn airs of religion, can carry ardor and confidence, or the contrary sentiments, into the breasts of thousands.

THERE are certain general principles, and rules of life and conduct, which always must be true, because they are conformable to the invariable nature of things. He who studies history as he would study philosophy, will soon distinguish and collect them, and by doing so will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience. I said he will distinguish them; for once more I must say, that as  
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to particular modes of actions, and measures of conduct, which the customs of different countries, the manners of different ages, and the circumstances of different conjunctures, have appropriated, as it were; it is always ridiculous, or imprudent and dangerous, to employ them. But this is not all. By contemplating the vast variety of particular characters and events; by examining the strange combinations of causes, different, remote and seemingly opposite, that often concur in producing one effect; and the surprising fertility of one single and uniform cause in the producing of a multitude of effects as different, as remote, and seemingly as opposite; by tracing carefully, as carefully as if the subject he considers were of personal and immediate concern to him, all the minute and sometimes scarce perceivable circumstances, either in the characters of actors, or in the course of actions, that history enables him to trace, and according to which the success of affairs, even the greatest, is mostly determined; by these, and such methods as these, for I might descend into a much greater detail, a man of parts may improve the study of history to its proper and principal use; he may sharpen the penetration, fix the attention of his mind, and strengthen his judgment; he may acquire the faculty and the habit of discerning quicker, and looking farther; and of exerting that flexibility, and steadiness, which are necessary to be joined in the conduct of all affairs that depend on the concurrence or opposition of other men.

Mr. LOCKE, I think, recommends the study of geometry even to those who have no design of being geometricians: and he gives a reason for it, that may be applied to the present case. Such persons may forget every problem that has been proposed, and every solution that they or others have given; but the habit of pursuing long trains of ideas will remain with

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them, and they will pierce through the mazes of sophism, and discover a latent truth, where persons who have not this habit will never find it.

IN this manner the study of history will prepare us for action and observation. History is the ancient author: experience is the modern language. We form our taste on the first; we translate the sense and reason, we transfuse the spirit and force; but we imitate only the particular graces of the original; we imitate them according to the idiom of our own tongue, that is, we substitute often equivalents in the lieu of them, and are far from affecting to copy them servilely. To conclude, as experience is conversant about the present, and the present enables us to guess at the future; so history is conversant about the past, and by knowing the things that have been, we become better able to judge of the things that are.

THIS use, my lord, which I make the proper and principal use of the study of history, is not insisted on by those who have writ concerning the method to be followed in this study: and since we propose different ends, we must of course take different ways. Few of their treatises have fallen into my hands: one, the method of BODIN, a man famous in his time, I remember to have read. I took it up with much expectation many years ago; I went through it, and remained extremely disappointed. He might have given almost any other title to his book as properly as that which stands before it. There are not many pages in it that relate any more to his subject than a tedious fifth chapter, wherein he accounts for the characters of nations according to their positions on the globe, and according to the influence of the stars; and assures his reader that nothing can be more  
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necessary



necessary than such a disquisition, "ad universam historiarum cognitionem, et incorruptum earum iudicium." In his method, we are to take first a general view of universal history, and chronology, in short abstracts, and then to study all particular histories and systems. SENECA speaks of men who spend their whole lives in learning how to act in life, "dum vitae instrumenta conquirunt." I doubt that this method of BODIN would conduct us in the same, or as bad a way; would leave us no time for action, or would make us unfit for it. A huge common-place book, wherein all the remarkable sayings and facts that we find in history are to be registred, may enable a man to talk or write like BODIN, but will never make him a better man, nor enable him to promote, like an useful citizen, the security, the peace, the welfare, or the grandeur of the community to which he belongs. I shall proceed therefore to speak of a method that leads to such purposes as these directly and certainly, without any regard to the methods that have been prescribed by others.

I THINK then we must be on our guard against this very affectation of learning, and this very wantonness of curiosity, which the examples and precepts we commonly meet with are calculated to flatter and indulge. We must neither dwell too long in the dark, nor wander about till we lose our way in the light. We are too apt to carry systems of philosophy beyond all our ideas, and systems of history beyond all our memorials. The philosopher begins with reason, and ends with imagination. The historian inverts this order: he begins without memorials and he sometimes ends with them. This silly custom is so prevalent among men of letters who apply themselves to the study of history, and has so much prejudice and so much authority on the side of it, that your lordship must give me leave to speak a little more particularly and plainly than



than I have done, in favor of common sense against an absurdity which is almost sanctified.

## R E F L E C T I O N S

### On the state of ancient HISTORY.

THE nature of man, and the constant course of human affairs, render it impossible that the first ages of any new nation which forms itself, should afford authentic materials for history. We have none such concerning the originals of any of those nations that actually subsist. Shall we expect to find them concerning the originals of nations dispersed, or extinguished, two or three thousand years ago? If a thread of dark and uncertain traditions, therefore, is made, as it commonly is, the introduction to history, we should touch it lightly, and run swiftly over it, far from insisting on it, either as authors or readers. Such introductions are at best no more than fanciful preludes, that try the instruments, and precede the concert. He must be void of judgment, and taste, one would think, who can take the first for true history, or the last for true harmony. And yet so it has been, and so it is, not in Germany and Holland alone; but in Italy, in France, and in England, where genius has abounded, and taste has been long refined. Our great scholars have dealt and deal in fables at least as much as our poets, with this difference to the disadvantage of the former, to whom I may apply the remark as justly as *SENECA* applied it to the dialecticians----“*tristius inepti sunt. Illi ex professo lascivunt; hi agere seipfos aliquid existimant.*” Learned men, in learned and inquisitive ages, who possessed many advantages that we have not, and among others that of being placed so many centuries nearer the original



nal truths that are the objects of so much laborious search, despaired of finding them, and gave fair warning to posterity, if posterity would have taken it. The ancient geographers, as PLUTARCH says in the life of THESEUS, when they laid down in their maps the little extent of sea and land that was known to them, left great spaces void. In some of these spaces they wrote, Here are sandy deserts, in others, Here are impassable marshes, Here is a chain of inhospitable mountains, or Here is a frozen ocean. Just so both he and other historians, when they related fabulous originals, were not wanting to set out the bounds beyond which there was neither history nor chronology. CENSORINUS has preserved the distinction of three aeras established by VARRO. This learned Roman antiquary did not determine whether the first period had any beginning, but fixed the end of it at the first, that is, according to him, the Ogygian deluge; which he placed, I think, some centuries backward than JULIUS AFRICANUS thought fit to place it afterwards. To this aera of absolute darkness he supposed that a kind of twilight succeeded, from the Ogygian deluge to the Olympic aera, and this he called the fabulous age. From this vulgar aera when CORAEBUS was crowned victor, and long after the true aera when these games were instituted by IPHITUS, the Greeks pretend to be able to digest their history with some order, clearness, and certainty: VARRO therefore looked on it as the break of day, or the beginning of the historical age. He might do so the rather, perhaps, because he included by it the date he likewise fixed, or, upon recollection, that the elder CATO had fixed, of the foundation of Rome within the period from which he supposed that historical truth was to be found. But yet most certain it is, that the history and chronology of the ages that follow are as confused and uncertain, as the history and chronology of those which immediately precede this aera.

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## I. The state of ancient profane history.

THE Greeks did not begin to write in prose till PHERECIDES of Syros introduced the custom: and CADMUS MILESIUS was their first historian. Now these men flourished long after the true, or even the vulgar Olympic aera; for JOSEPHUS affirms, and in this he has great probability on his side, that CADMUS MILESIUS, and ACUSILAUS ARGIVUS, in a word the oldest historians in Greece, were very little more ancient than the expedition of the Persians against the Greeks. As several centuries passed between the Olympic aera and these first historians, there passed likewise several more between these and the first Greek chronologers. TIMOEUS about the time of PTOLOMY PHILADELPHUS, and ERATOSTHENES about that of PTOLOMY EVERGETES, seem first to have digested the events recorded by them, according to the olympiads. Precedent writers mentioned sometimes the olympiads; but this rule of reckoning was not brought into established use sooner. The rule could not serve to render history more clear and certain till it was followed: it was not followed till about five hundred years after the Olympic aera. There remains therefore no pretence to place the beginning of the historical age so high as VARRO placed it, by five hundred years.

HELLANICUS indeed and others pretended to give the originals of cities and governments, and to deduce their narrations from great antiquity. Their works are lost, but we can judge how inconsiderable the loss is, by the writings of that age which remain, and by the report of those who had seen the others. For instance, HERODOTUS was cotemporary with HELLANICUS. HERODOTUS was inquisitive enough in all conscience, and proposed to publish all he could learn of the antiquities



quities of the Ionians, Lydians, Phrygians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Medes, and Persians; that is, of almost all the nations who were known in his time to exist. If he wrote Assyriacs, we have them not; but we are sure that this word was used proverbially to signify fabulous legends, soon after his time, and when the mode of publishing such relations and histories prevailed among the Greeks.

IN the nine books we have, he goes back indeed almost to the Olympic aera, without taking notice of it however; but he goes back only to tell an old woman's tale, of a king who lost his crown for shewing his wife naked to his favorite; and from CANDAULES and GYGES he hastens, or rather he takes a great leap, down to CYRUS.

SOMETHING like a thread of history of the Medes and then of the Persians, to the flight of XERXES, which happened in his own time, is carried on. The events of his own time are related with an air of history. But all accounts of the Greeks as well as the Persians, which precede these, and all the accounts which he gives occasionally of other nations, were drawn up most manifestly on broken, perplexed, and doubtful scraps of tradition. He had neither original records, nor any authentic memorials to guide him, and yet these are the sole foundations of true history. HEROBOTUS flourished, I think, little more than half a century, and XENOPHON little more than a whole century, after the death of CYRUS: and yet how various and repugnant are the relations made by these two historians, of the birth, life, and death of this prince? If more histories had come down from these ages to ours, the uncertainty and inutility of them all would be but the more manifest. We should find that ACUSILAUS rejected the traditions of HESIOD, that HELLANICUS contradicted ACUSILAUS,



that EPHORUS accused HELLANICUS, that TIMAEUS accused EPHORUS, and all posterior writers TIMAEUS. This is the report of JOSEPHUS. But, in order to shew the ignorance and falshood of all those writers through whom the traditions of profane antiquity came to the Greeks, I will quote to your lordship a much better authority than that of JOSEPHUS; the authority of one who had no prejudice to bias him, no particular cause to defend, nor system of ancient history to establish, and all the helps, as well as talents, necessary to make him a competent judge. The man I mean is STRABO.

SPEAKING of the Massagetæ in his eleventh book, he writes to this effect: that no author had given a true account of them, tho several had writ of the war that CYRUS waged against them; and that historians had found as little credit in what they had related concerning the affairs of the Persians, Medes, and Syrians: that this was due to their folly; for observing that those who wrote fables professedly were held in esteem, these men imagined they should render their writings more agreeable, if, under the appearance and pretence of true history, they related what they had neither seen nor heard from persons able to give them true information; and that accordingly their only aim had been to dress up pleasing and marvellous relations: that one may better give credit to HESIOD and HOMER, when they talk of their heroes, nay even to dramatic poets, than to CTESIAS, HERODOTUS, HELLANICUS, and their followers: that it is not safe to give credit even to the greatest part of the historians who writ concerning ALEXANDER; since they too, encouraged by the greater reputation of this conqueror, by the distance to which he carried his arms, and by the difficulty of disproving what they said of actions performed in regions so remote, were apt to deceive: that indeed when the Roman empire on one side, and the Parthian,



Parthian on the other, came to extend themselves, the truth of things grew to be better known.

You see, my lord, not only how late profane history began to be writ by the Greeks, but how much later it began to be writ with any regard to truth; and consequently what wretched materials the learned men, who arose after the age of ALEXANDER, had to employ, when they attempted to form systems of ancient history and chronology. We have some remains of that laborious compiler DIODORUS SICULUS, but do we find in him any thread of ancient history, I mean, that which passed for ancient in his time? What complaints, on the contrary, does he not make of former historians? how frankly does he confess the little and uncertain light he had to follow in his researches? Yet DIODORUS, as well as PLUTARCH, and others, had not only the older Greek historians, but the more modern antiquaries, who pretended to have searched into the records and registers of nations, even at that time renowned for their antiquity. BEROSUS, for instance, and MANETHO, one a Babylonian and the other an Egyptian priest, had published the antiquities of their countries in the time of the PTOLEMYS. BEROSUS pretended to give the history of four hundred and eighty years. PLINY, if I remember right, for I say this on memory, speaks to this effect in the sixth book of his Natural History: and if it was so, these years were probably years of NABONASSAR. MANETHO began his history, God knows when, from the progress of Isis, or some other as well ascertained period. He followed the Egyptian traditions of dynasties of Gods and Demi-Gods; and derived his anecdotes from the first MERCURY, who had inscribed them in sacred characters, on antediluvian pillars, antediluvian at least according to our received chronology, from which the second MERCURY had transcribed them, and inserted them into

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his works. We have not these antiquities; for the monk of VITERBO was soon detected: and if we had them, they would either add to our uncertainty, and encrease the chaos of learning, or tell us nothing worth our knowledge. For thus I reason. Had they given particular and historical accounts conformable to the scriptures of the Jews, JOSEPHUS, JULIUS AFRICANUS, and EUSEBIUS would have made quite other extracts from their writings, and would have altered and contradicted them less. The accounts they gave therefore, were repugnant to sacred writ, or they were defective: they would have established pyrrhonism, or have baulked our curiosity.

## 2. Of sacred history.

WHAT memorials therefore remain to give us light into the originals of ancient nations, and the history of those ages, we commonly call the first ages? The Bible, it will be said; that is, the historical part of it in the Old testament. But, my lord, even these divine books must be reputed insufficient to the purpose, by every candid and impartial man who considers either their authority as histories, or the matter they contain. For what are they? and how came they to us? At the time when ALEXANDER carried his arms into Asia, a people of Syria, till then unknown, became known to the Greeks: this people had been slaves to the Egyptians, Assyrians, Medes, and Persians, as these several empires prevailed: ten parts in twelve of them had been transplanted by ancient conquerors, and melted down and lost in the east, several ages before the establishment of the empire that ALEXANDER destroyed: the other two parts had been carried captive to Babylon a little before the same aera. This captivity was not indeed perpetual, like the other; but it lasted so long, and such circumstances, what-  
ever



ever they were, accompanied it, that the captives forgot their country, and even their language, the Hebrew dialect at least and character: and a few of them only could be wrought upon, by the zeal of some particular men, to return home, when the indulgence of the Persian monarchs gave them leave to rebuild their city and to repeople their ancient patrimony. Even this remnant of the nation did not continue long entire. Another great transmigration followed; and the Jews, that settled under the protection of the PTOLEMYS, forgot their language in Egypt, as the forefathers of these Jews had forgot theirs in Chaldea. More attached however to their religion in Egypt, for reasons easy to be deduced from the new institutions that prevailed after the captivity among them, than their ancestors had been in Chaldea, a version of their sacred writings was made into Greek at Alexandria, not long after the canon of these scriptures had been finished at Jerusalem; for many years could not intervene between the death of SIMON the just, by whom this canon was finished, if he died during the reign of PTOLEMY SOTER, and the beginning of this famous translation under PTOLEMY PHILADELPHUS. The Hellenist Jews reported as many marvellous things to authorize, and even to sanctify this translation, as the other Jews had reported about ESDRAS who began, and SIMON the just who finished, the canon of their scriptures. These holy romances slid into tradition, and tradition became history: the fathers of our christian church did not disdain to employ them. St. JEROME, for instance, laughed at the story of the seventy-two elders, whose translations were found to be, upon comparison, word for word the same, tho made separately, and by men who had no communication with one another. But the same St. JEROME, in the same place, quotes ARISTEAS, one of the guard of PTOLEMY PHILADELPHUS, as a real personage.

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THE account pretended to be writ by this ARISTEAS, of all that passed relating to the translation, was enough for his purpose. This he retained, and he rejected only the more improbable circumstances, which had been added to the tale, and which laid it open to most suspicion. In this he shewed great prudence, and better judgment, than that zealous, but weak apologist JUSTIN, who believed the whole story himself, and endeavored to impose it on mankind.

THUS you see, my lord, that when we consider these books barely as histories, delivered to us on the faith of a superstitious people, among whom the custom and art of pious lying prevailed remarkably, we may be allowed to doubt whether greater credit is to be given to what they tell us concerning the original, compiled in their own country and as it were out of the sight of the rest of the world; than we know, with such a certainty as no scholar presumes to deny, that we ought to give to what they tell us concerning the copy?

THE Hellenist Jews were extremely pleased, no doubt, to have their scriptures in a language they understood, and that might spread the fame of their antiquity, and do honor to their nation, among their masters the Greeks. But yet we do not find that the authority of these books prevailed, or that even they were much known among the Pagan world. The reason of this cannot be, that the Greeks admired nothing that was not of their own growth, "*sua tantum mirantur*:" for, on the contrary, they were inquisitive and credulous in the highest degree, and they collected and published at least as many idle traditions of other nations, as they propagated of their own. JOSEPHUS pretended that THEOPOMPUS, a disciple of ISOCRATES being about to insert in his history some things he had taken out of holy writ, the poor man became troubled in mind for several



several days; and that having prayed to God, during an intermission of his illness, to reveal to him the cause of it, he learned in his sleep that this attempt was the cause; upon which he quitted the design and was cured. If JOSEPHUS had been a little more consistent than he is very often, such a story as this would not have been told by one, who was fond, as Jews and Christians in general have been, to create an opinion that the Gentiles took not their history alone, but their philosophy and all their valuable knowledge, from the Jews. Notwithstanding this story therefore, which is told in the fifteenth book of the Jewish antiquities, and means nothing, or means to shew that the divine providence would not suffer anecdotes of sacred to be mingled with profane history; the practice of JOSEPHUS himself, and of all those who have had the same design in view, has been to confirm the former by the latter, and at any rate to suppose an appearance at least of conformity between them. We are told HECATEUS ABDERITA, for there were two of that name, writ a history favorable to the Jews: and, not to multiply instances, tho I might easily do it, even ALEXANDER POLYHISTOR is called in. He is quoted by JOSEPHUS, and praised by EUSEBIUS as a man of parts and great variety of learning. His testimony, about the deluge and tower of Babel, is produced by St. CYRIL in his first book against JULIAN: and JUSTIN the apologist and martyr, in his exhortation to the Greeks, makes use of the same authority, among those that mention MOSES as a leader and prince of the Jews. Tho this POLYHISTOR, if I remember right what I think I have met with in SUIDAS, spoke only of a woman he called Moso, “cujus scriptum est lex hebraeorum\*.” Had the

\* Μωσῶ, γυνὴ Ἑβραία ἧς ἐστὶ σὺγγραμμά οὐ παρὶ Ἑβραίοις νομῶ· ὡς φησὶν Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μιλήσιος ὁ Πολυΐτωρ. Sui. Lex. tom. ii. p. 583.

Ἀλέξανδρος . . . ὁ Πολυΐτωρ . . . συνέγραψε βιβλία ἀρίθμῳ κρείττω. καὶ περὶ Ῥώμης βιβλία πέντε. ἐν τούτοις λέγει, ὡς γυνὴ γέγονεν Ἑβραία Μωσῶ, ἧς ἐστὶ σὺγγραμμά οὐ παρὶ Ἑβραίοις νομος. Id. tom. i. p. 105. Edit. Cantab. 1725.



the Greek historians been conformable to the sacred, I cannot see that their authority, which was not cotemporary, would have been of any weight. They might have copied MOSES, and so they did CTESIAS. But even this was not the case: whatever use a particular writer here and there might make occasionally of the scriptures, certain it is that the Jews continued to be as much despised, and their history to be as generally neglected, nay almost as generally unknown, for a long time at least after the version was made at Alexandria, as they had been before. APION, an Egyptian, a man of much erudition, appeared in the world some centuries afterwards. He wrote, among other antiquities, those of his own country: and as he was obliged to speak very often of the Jews, he spoke of them in a manner neither much to their honor, nor to that of their histories. He wrote purposely against them: and JOSEPHUS attempted afterwards, but APION was then dead, to refute him. APION passed, I know, for a vain and noisy pedant; but he passed likewise for a curious, a laborious, and a learned antiquary. If he was cabalistical or superstitious, JOSEPHUS was at least as much so as he: and if he flattered CALIGULA, JOSEPHUS introduced himself to the court of NERO and the favor of POPPAEA, by no very honorable means, under the protection of ALITURUS, a player, and a Jew; to say nothing of his applying to VESPASIAN the prophecies concerning the Messiah, nor of his accompanying TITUS to the siege of Jerusalem.

IN short, my lord, the Jewish history never obtained any credit in the world, till christianity was established. The foundations of this system being laid partly in these histories, and in the prophecies joined to them or inserted in them, christianity has reflected back upon them an authority which they had not before, and this authority has prevailed where-  
ever



ever christianity has spread. Both Jews and Christians hold the same books in great veneration, whilst each condemns the other for not understanding, or for abusing them. But I apprehend that the zeal of both has done much hurt, by endeavoring to extend their authority much farther than is necessary for the support perhaps of Judaism, but to be sure of christianity. I explain myself that I may offend no pious ear.

SIMON, in the preface of his critical history of the Old testament, cites a divine of the faculty of Paris, who held that the inspirations of the authors of those books, which the church receives as the word of GOD, should be extended no farther than to matters purely of doctrine, or to such as have a near and necessary relation to these; and that whenever these authors writ on other subjects, such as Egyptian, Assyrian, or other history, they had no more of the divine assistance than any other persons of piety. This notion of inspirations that came occasionally, that illuminated the minds and guided the hands of the sacred penmen while they were writing one page, and restrained their influence while the same authors were writing another, may be cavilled against: and what is there that may not? But surely it deserves to be treated with respect, since it tends to establish a distinction between the legal, doctrinal, or prophetic parts of the Bible, and the historical: without which distinction it is impossible to establish the first, as evidently and as solidly as the interests of religion require: at least it appears impossible to me, after having examined and considered, as well as I am able, all the trials of this kind that have been made by subtile as well as learned men. The Old is said to be the foundation of the New, and so it is in one sense: the system of religion contained in the latter, refers to the system of religion contained in the



the former, and supposes the truth of it. But the authority on which we receive the books of the New testament, is so far from being founded on the authority of the Old testament, that it is quite independent on it; the New being proved, gives authority to the Old, but borrows none from it; and gives this authority to the particular parts only. CHRIST came to fulfil the prophecies; but not to consecrate all the written, any more than the oral, traditions of the Jews. We must believe these traditions as far as they relate to christianity, as far as christianity refers to them, or supposes them necessary; but we can be under no obligation to believe them any farther, since without christianity we should be under no obligation to believe them at all.

IT hath been said by ABBADIE, and others, "That the accidents which have happened to alter the texts of the Bible, and to disfigure, if I may say so, the scriptures in many respects, could not have been prevented without a perpetual standing miracle, and that a perpetual standing miracle is not in the order of providence." Now I can by no means subscribe to this opinion. It seems evident to my reason that the very contrary must be true; if we suppose that God acts towards men according to the moral fitness of things: and if we suppose that he acts arbitrarily, we can form no opinion at all. I think that these accidents would not have happened, or that the scriptures would have been preserved entirely in their genuine purity notwithstanding these accidents, if they had been entirely dictated by the HOLY GHOST: and the proof of this probable proposition, according to our clearest and most distinct ideas of wisdom and moral fitness, is obvious and easy. But these scriptures are not so come down to us: they are come down  
broken



broken and confused, full of additions, interpolations, and transpositions, made we neither know when, nor by whom; and such, in short, as never appeared on the face of any other book, on whose authority men have agreed to rely.

THIS being so, my lord, what hypothesis shall we follow? Shall we adhere to some such distinction as I have mentioned? Shall we say, for instance, that the scriptures were written originally by the authors to whom they are vulgarly ascribed, but that these authors writ nothing by inspiration, except the legal, the doctrinal, and the prophetic parts, and that in every other respect their authority is purely human, and therefore fallible? Or shall we say that these histories are nothing more than compilations of old traditions, and abridgments of old records, made in later times, as they appear to every one who reads them without prepossession, and with attention? Shall we add, that which ever of these probabilities be true, we may believe, consistently with either, notwithstanding the decision of any divines, who know no more than you or I, or any other man, of the order of providence, that all those parts and passages of the Old testament which contain prophecies, or matters of law or doctrine, and which were from the first of such importance in the designs of providence to all future generations, and even to the whole race of mankind, have been from the first the peculiar care of providence? Shall we insist that such particular parts and passages, which are plainly marked out and sufficiently confirmed by the system of the christian revelation, and by the completion of the prophecies, have been preserved from corruption by ways impenetrable to us, amidst all the changes and chances to which the books wherein they are recorded have been exposed; and that neither original writers, nor later compilers, have been suffered to make any essential alterations, such as would have



falsified the law of GOD and the principles of the Jewish and Christian religions, in any of these divine fundamental truths? Upon such hypotheses, we may assert without scruple, that the genealogies and histories of the Old testament are in no respect sufficient foundations for a chronology from the beginning of time, nor for universal history. But then the same hypotheses will secure the infallibility of scripture authority as far as religion is concerned. Faith and reason may be reconciled a little better than they commonly are. I may deny that the Old testament is transmitted to us under all the conditions of an authentic history, and yet be at liberty to maintain that the passages in it which establish original sin, which seem favorable to the doctrine of the Trinity, which foretell the coming of the Messiah, and all others of similar kind, are come down to us as they were originally dictated by the HOLY GHOST.

IN attributing the whole credibility of the Old testament to the authority of the New, and in limiting the authenticity of the Jewish scriptures to those parts alone that concern law, doctrine, and prophecy, by which their chronology and the far greatest part of their history are excluded, I will venture to assure your lordship that I do not assume so much, as is assumed in every hypothesis that affixes the divine seal of inspiration to the whole canon; that rests the whole proof on Jewish veracity; and that pretends to account particularly and positively for the descent of these ancient writings in their present state.

ANOTHER reason, for which I have insisted the rather on the distinction so often mentioned, is this. I think we may find very good foundation for it even in the bible: and tho' this be a point very little attended to, and much disguised, it would



would not be hard to shew, upon great inducements of probability, that the law and the history were far from being blended together as they now stand in the Pentateuch, even from the time of MOSES down to that of ESDRAS. But the principal and decisive reason for separating in such manner the legal, doctrinal, and prophetic parts, from the historical, is the necessity of having some rule to go by: and, I protest, I know of none that is yet agreed upon. I content myself therefore to fix my opinion concerning the authority of the Old testament in this manner, and carry it thus far only. We must do so, or we must enter into that labyrinth of dispute and contradiction, wherein even the most orthodox Jews and Christians have wandered so many ages, and still wander. It is strange, but it is true; not only the Jews differ from the Christians, but Jews and Christians both differ among themselves, concerning almost every point that is necessary to be certainly known and agreed upon, in order to establish the authority of books which both have received already as authentic and sacred. So that whoever takes the pains to read what learned men have writ on this subject, will find that they leave the matter as doubtful as they took it up. Who were the authors of these scriptures, when they were published, how they were composed and preserved, or renewed, to use a remarkable expression of the famous HUET in his Demonstration; in fine, how they were lost during the captivity, and how they were retrieved after it, are all matters of controversy to this day.

It would be easy for me to descend into a greater detail, and to convince your lordship of what I have been saying in general by an induction of particulars, even without any other help than that of a few notes which I took when I applied myself to this examination, and which now lye before me.  
But



But such a digression would carry me too far: and I fear that you will think I have said already more than enough upon this part of my subject. I go on therefore to observe to your lordship, that if the history of the Old testament was as exact and as authentic, as the ignorance and impudence of some rabbies have made them assert that it is: if we could believe with them that MOSES wrote every syllable in the Pentateuch as it now stands, or that all the psalms were written by DAVID: nay, if we could believe, with PHILO and JOSEPHUS, that MOSES wrote the account of his own death and sepulture, and made a sort of a funeral panegyric on himself, as we find them in the last chapter of Deuteronomy; yet still would I venture to assert, that he who expects to find a system of chronology, or a thread of history, or sufficient materials for either, in the books of the Old testament, expects to find what the authors of these books, whoever they were, never intended. They are extracts of genealogies, not genealogies; extracts of histories, not histories. The Jews themselves allow their genealogies to be very imperfect, and produce examples of omissions and errors in them, which denote sufficiently that these genealogies are extracts, wherein every generation in the course of descent is not mentioned. I have read somewhere, perhaps in the works of St. JEROME, that this father justifies the opinion of those who think it impossible to fix any certain chronology on that of the bible: and this opinion will be justified still better, to the understanding of every man that considers how grossly the Jews blunder whenever they meddle with chronology; for this plain reason, because their scriptures are imperfect in this respect, and because they rely on their oral, to rectify and supply their written, traditions: that is, they rely on traditions compiled long after the canon of their scriptures, but deemed by them of equal antiquity and authority. Thus, for instance, DANIEL and SIMON the just, according to them  
were



were members at the same time of the great synagogue which began and finished the canon of the Old testament, under the presidency of ESDRAS. This ESDRAS was the prophet MALACHI. DARIUS the son of HYSTASPES WAS ARTAXERXES LONGIMANUS; he was AHASUERUS, and he was the same DARIUS whom ALEXANDER conquered. This may serve as a sample of Jewish chronology, formed on their scriptures which afford insufficient lights, and on their traditions which afford false lights. We are indeed more correct, and come nearer to the truth in these instances, perhaps in some others, because we make use of profane chronology to help us. But profane chronology is itself so modern, so precarious, that this help does not reach to the greatest part of that time to which sacred chronology extends; that when it begins to help, it begins to perplex us too; and finally, that even with this help we should not have had so much as the appearance of a complete chronological system, and the same may be said of universal history, if learned men had not proceeded very wisely, on one uniform maxim, from the first ages of christianity, when a custom of sanctifying profane learning, as well as profane rites, which the Jews had imprudently laid aside, was taken up by the Christians. The maxim I mean is this, that profane authority be admitted without scruple or doubt, whenever it says, or whenever it can be made to say, if not "totidem verbis," yet "totidem syllabis," or "totidem literis" at least, or whenever it can be made by any interpretation to mean, what confirms, or supplies in a consistent manner, the holy writ; and that the same authority be rejected, when nothing of this kind can be done, but the contradiction or inconsistency remains irreconcilable. Such a liberty as this would not be allowed in any other case; because it supposes the very thing that is to be proved. But we see it taken,



taken, very properly to be sure, in favor of sacred and infal-  
lible writings, when they are compared with others.

IN order to perceive with the utmost evidence, that the scope and design of the author or authors of the Pentateuch, and of the other books of the Old testament, answer as little the purpose of antiquaries, in history, as in chronology, it will be sufficient briefly to call to mind the sum of what they relate, from the creation of the world to the establishment of the Persian empire. If the antediluvian world continued one thousand six hundred and fifty six years, and if the vocation of ABRAHAM is to be placed four hundred and twenty six years below the deluge, these twenty centuries make almost two thirds of the period mentioned: and the whole history of them is comprized in eleven short chapters of Genesis; which is certainly the most compendious extract that ever was made. If we examine the contents of these chapters, do we find any thing like an universal history, or so much as an abridgment of it? ADAM and EVE were created, they broke the commandment of GOD, they were driven out of the garden of Eden, one of their sons killed his brother, but their race soon multiplied and peopled the earth. What geography now have we, what history of this antediluvian world? Why, none. The sons of God, it is said, lay with the daughters of men, and begot giants, and GOD drowned all the inhabitants of the earth, except one family. After this we read that the earth was re-peopled; but these children of one family were divided into several languages, even whilst they lived together, spoke the same language, and were employed in the same work. Out of one of the countries into which they dispersed themselves, Chaldea, GOD called ABRAHAM some time afterwards, with magnificent promises, and conducted him to a country called  
Chanaan.



Chanaan. Did this author, my lord, intend an universal history? Certainly not. The tenth chapter of Genesis names indeed some of the generations descending from the sons of NOAH, some of the cities founded, and some of the countries planted by them. But what are bare names, naked of circumstances, without descriptions of countries, or relations of events? They furnish matter only for guess and dispute; and even the similitude of them, which is often used as a clue to lead us to the discovery of historical truth, has notoriously contributed to propagate error, and to encrease the perplexity of ancient tradition. These imperfect and dark accounts have not furnished matter for guess and dispute alone; but a much worse use has been made of them by Jewish rabbies, Christian fathers, and Mahometan doctors, in their profane extensions of this part of the Mosaic history. The creation of the first man is described by some, as if, Preadamites, they had assisted at it. They talk of his beauty as if they had seen him, of his gigantic size as if they had measured him, and of his prodigious knowledge as if they had conversed with him. They point out the very spot where EVE laid her head the first time he enjoyed her. They have minutes of the whole conversation between this mother of mankind, who damned her children before she bore them, and the serpent. Some are positive that CAIN quarrelled with ABEL about a point of doctrine, and others affirm that the dispute rose about a girl. A great deal of such stuff may be easily collected about ENOCH, about NOAH, and about the sons of NOAH; but I wave any farther mention of such impertinencies as BONZES or TALAPOINS would almost blush to relate. Upon the whole matter, if we may guess at the design of an author by the contents of his book, the design of MOSES, or of the author of the history ascribed to him, in this part of it, was to inform the people of Israel of their descent from NOAH by SEM, and of NOAH's from ADAM



by SETH; to illustrate their original; to establish their claim to the land of Chanaan, and to justify all the cruelties committed by JOSHUA in the conquest of the Chanaanites, in whom, says BOCHART, "the prophecy of NOAH was completed, when they were subdued by the Israelites, who had been so long slaves to the Egyptians."

ALLOW me to make, as I go along, a short reflection or two on this prophecy, and the completion of it, as they stand recorded in the Pentateuch, out of many that might be made. The terms of the prophecy then are not very clear: and the curse pronounced in it contradicts all our notions of order and of justice. One is tempted to think, that the patriarch was still drunk; and that no man in his senses could hold such language, or pass such a sentence. Certain it is, that no writer but a Jew could impute to the oeconomy of divine providence the accomplishment of such a prediction, nor make the Supreme Being the executor of such a curse.

HAM alone offended; CHANAAN was innocent; for the Hebrew and other doctors who would make the son an accomplice with his father, affirm not only without, but against the express authority of the text. CHANAAN was however alone cursed: and he became, according to his grandfather's prophecy, "a servant of servants," that is, the vilest and worst of slaves (for I take these words in a sense, if not the most natural, the most favorable to the prophecy, and the least absurd) to SEM, tho' not to JAPHET, when the Israelites conquered Palestine; to one of his uncles, not to his brethren. Will it be said----it has been said----that where we read CHANAAN we are to understand HAM, whose brethren SEM and JAPHET were? At this rate, we shall never know what we read: as these critics never care what they say. Will it



it be said----this has been said too----that HAM was punished in his posterity, when CHANAAN was cursed, and his descendants were exterminated? But who does not see that the curse, and the punishment, in this case, fell on CHANAAN and his posterity, exclusively of the rest of the posterity of HAM; and were therefore the curse and punishment of the son, not of the father, properly? The descendants of MESRAIM, another of his sons, were the Egyptians: and they were so far from being servants of servants to their cousins the Semites, that these were servants of servants to them, during more than fourscore years. Why the posterity of CHANAAN was to be deemed an accursed race, it is easy to account; and I have mentioned it just now. But it is not so easy to account, why the posterity of the righteous SEM, that great example of filial reverence, became slaves to another branch of the family of HAM.

IT would not be worth while to lengthen this tedious letter, by setting down any more of the contents of the history of the bible. Your lordship may please to call the substance of it to your mind, and your native candor and love of truth will oblige you then to confess, that these sacred books do not aim, in any part of them, at any thing like universal chronology and history. They contain a very imperfect account of the Israelites themselves; of their settlement in the land of promise, of which, by the way, they never had entire, and scarce ever peaceable possession; of their divisions, apostasies, repentances, relapses, triumphs, and defeats, under the occasional government of their judges, and under that of their kings; of the Galilean and Samaritan captivities, into which they were carried by the kings of Assyria, and of that which was brought on the remnant of this people when the kingdom of Judah was destroyed by those princes who governed the empire founded on the union of Nineveh and Babylon.



These things are all related, your lordship knows, in a very summary and confused manner: and we learn so little of other nations by these accounts, that if we did not borrow some light from the traditions of other nations, we should scarce understand them. One particular observation, and but one, I will make, to shew what knowledge in the history of mankind, and in the computation of time, may be expected from these books. The Assyrians were their neighbours, powerful neighbours, with whom they had much and long to do. Of this empire therefore, if of any thing, we might hope to find some satisfactory accounts. What do we find? The scripture takes no notice of any Assyrian kingdom, till just before the time when profane history makes that empire to end. Then we hear of PHUL, of TEG LATH-PHALASSER, who was perhaps the same person, and of SALMANASER, who took Samaria in the twelfth of the aera of NABONASSER, that is, twelve years after the Assyrian empire was no more. SENACHERIB succeeds to him, and ASSERHADDON to SENACHERIB. What shall we say to this apparent contrariety? If the silence of the bible creates a strong presumption against the first, may not the silence of profane authority create some against the second Assyrian monarchs? The pains that are taken to persuade, that there is room enough between SARDANAPALUS and CYRUS for the second, will not resolve the difficulty. Something much more plausible may be said, but even this will be hypothetical, and liable to great contradiction. So that, upon the whole matter, the scriptures are so far from giving us light into general history, that they encrease the obscurity even of those parts to which they have the nearest relation. We have therefore neither in profane nor in sacred authors such authentic, clear, distinct, and full accounts of the originals of ancient nations, and of the great events of those ages that are commonly called the first ages, as deserve



to go by the name of history, or as afford sufficient materials for chronology and history.

I MIGHT now proceed to observe to your lordship how this has happened, not only by the necessary consequences of human nature, and the ordinary course of human affairs, but by the policy, artifice, corruption, and folly of mankind. But this would be to heap digression upon digression, and to presume too much on your patience. I shall therefore content myself to apply these reflections on the state of ancient history to the study of history, and to the method to be observed in it; as soon as your lordship has rested yourself a little after reading, and I after writing so long a letter.

OF