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Essay III. Containing some farther reflections on the rise and progress of monotheism, that first and great principle of natural theology, or the first philosophy.

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ESSAY THE THIRD:

Containing some further REFLECTIONS

On the RISE and PROGRESS of
MONOTHEISM,

That first and great Principle of NATURAL THEOLOGY,

OR

The FIRST PHILOSOPHY.

VOL. IV.

Bb

OF THE FIRST PHILOSOPHY
IN THREE BOOKS
BY
MONTESSIEU
OF THE RISE AND PROGRESS OF
MONTESQUIEU
THE FIRST AND GREAT PRINCIPLE OF NATURAL LIBERTY
OF THE FIRST PHILOSOPHY

VOL. IV.

ESSAY THE THIRD.

SECTION I.

I HAD finished the last essay before I recollected, that there was something in Mr. LOCKE's discourse concerning the reasonableness of christianity, very repugnant to what I have advanced about the knowledge of the one true God, and to what I shall have occasion to say, on another occasion, about the ignorance of natural religion, under which it is supposed that mankind labored before the coming of Christ. I shall not anticipate the second point, but shall bestow some more reflections on the first; in order to judge, whilst the subject is fresh in my mind, whether I ought to retract any thing that I have said to you in conversation, or that has fallen from my pen upon the subject. If it appears, on examination, that my notions are not so well founded in fact, and in reason, as those of this great man in the present case, I shall submit with pleasure to an authority, that I respect extremely in all cases; and if it appears that they are better founded than his in both, one useful lesson will be the result of this examination. We shall learn how unsafe it is to take for granted any thing, in matters especially which concern, or which are thought to concern, religion, that we have not ourselves examined, and how inexorable it is to do this in cases wherein we may be able, with a little pains, to judge for ourselves.

THE first article of natural theology, in which the heathen were deficient, according to Mr. LOCKE, was the knowledge of one God, maker of all things. He admits, at the same

time, that the works of nature, in every part of them, sufficiently evidenced a deity; and that, by the impressions of himself, God was easy to be found. These assertions do not seem very consistent, and therefore it is added, that the world made so little use of their reason, that they saw him not--- sense and lust blinded their minds. But the rational, and thinking part of mankind, he confesses, found the one supreme, invisible God, when they sought after him. If this be true now, as it is most certainly, the heathen world made as good use of their reason, for ought I can see, as the christian world. In this, it is not the irrational and unthinking, but the rational and thinking part of mankind who seek, and find the true God; and just so we are told, that it was in the other. Besides, if this be true, it follows, that this great and fundamental article of natural theology is discoverable by a due use of human reason; and Mr. LOCKE acknowledges accordingly again, that God was found by the wise and virtuous, which is a limitation of no great significancy to his purpose, since the vicious would have sought him in no state of mankind, nor the foolish have found him. But says this writer, the wise and virtuous had never authority enough to prevail on the multitude, and to persuade the societies of men, that there was but one God. If he had proved, as well as affirmed this, he would only have proved, what no man denies, that sufficient means to reclaim men from polytheism and idolatry, and to establish the belief of one God, appear to have been wanting in general, and to a great degree, as far as the memorials we have of antient nations can shew. He would not have proved, that the light of nature was insufficient, nor that the religion of nature was defective in this respect. He would not have proved, what he had in view to establish, that the belief and worship of one God was the national religion of the Israelites alone, and that it was their particular privilege, and advantage, to know the
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true God, and the true worship of him; whilst all other nations, from the beginning, adored the host of heaven, as EUSEBIUS asserts very confidently, tho he is far from proving it.

EUSEBIUS took much pains, and used much art, I might say artifice, to spread an opinion that this knowledge, and all good theology were derived from the Jews, and from their scriptures; nay that the philology, and philosophy of the whole learned world were purloined from thence, and the heathen were plagiarists, who lighted their candles at the fire of the sanctuary, as some modern EUSEBIUS or other, GALE, I think, expresses himself. JOSEPHUS had gone before EUSEBIUS in the same design: for thus far Jews and Christians made their cause common, and he had begun to falsify chronology, that he might give his nation a surprizing antiquity. EUSEBIUS did the same, and without taking the trouble of descending into particulars, many of which are acknowledged by learned and orthodox writers, I may say, that from that time to this, or to the time when by the revival of letters, and the invention of printing, which made the knowledge of antiquity more easy and common, much the same practice was continued with much the same success. Antient memorials have been forged and altered for this particular purpose, mere assumptions have been delivered as facts, and nothing has been neglected to give not only antiquity, but illustration, to a nation that never had much of the latter out of their own writings, and those of christianity. As the history of the Jews was committed to the care of their scribes; so the propagation of every learned system that could tend to the confirmation of it, by reconciling anachronisms, and by coloring improbabilities, has been the charge of a particular order of men among Christians, who had the monopoly of learning for many ages, and

and who have had a great share of it since. This has been imposed on the bulk of mankind, prepared by their prejudices to acquiesce under the authority of great names, and frightened from examining by the enormous piles of greek, and latin, and eastern languages, in which such authors seem to entrench themselves.

NOTWITHSTANDING this, I will say, and, if I know any thing, I say it on knowledge, that these entrenchments are not tenable. They cannot be battered down always, perhaps, by the same arms by which they are defended, but sure I am they may be undermined, and he who searches their foundations will find that they are laid on sand. JOSEPHUS, and EUSEBIUS will be of great use to him, against themselves. Their writings are repertories of valuable fragments, and of such as would be more so, if more credit could be given to the fidelity of those who cite them. I have sometimes thought, that we might apply properly enough to the jew, and the christian author, what LA BRUYERE says, in his characters, of PERAULT, that he quoted so many passages from antient writers, whilst he attempted to prove the superiority of the moderns, that his works were read for the sake of these passages.

THINKING in this manner, I could not fail to be surpris'd when I found such assertions, as are mentioned above, in a treatise writ by Mr. LOCKE. The common herd of writers copy one another in every point that makes for their common cause, about which alone, and not about truth, they seem to be concerned. They affirm over and over so positively, and so long, things destitute of proof, or evident falsities, that even the last grow into belief, according to the practice of the court of Rome, as father PAUL represents it, in her usurpations. I should not have easily suspected Mr. LOCKE of such a proceeding, nor of
affirm-

affirming dogmatically what he had not sufficiently examined. But he has writ below himself in this instance, by going out of his way, and has assumed the spirit of those who write on the same subject, much like Sir ISAAC NEWTON, who lost himself in the vague probabilities of chronology, after having pursued with so much success the certainty of mathematical demonstration.

I MEDDLE not here with any thing that is said concerning that clear knowledge of their duty, which was wanting to mankind, as Mr. LOCKE affirms very untruly, before the coming of Christ, nor with the theological part of this treatise. I confine myself to these propositions, that all the heathen were in a state of darkness, and ignorance of the true God, and consequently that the belief and worship of one God was the national religion of the Israelites alone. Now here I observe a want of that precision, which this great man is so careful to keep in all his other writings. As he does not distinguish enough the want of a sufficient knowledge of natural religion, and the want of sufficient means to propagate it, which he rather confounds in all he says about them, so he uses these two expressions, the true God, and one God, as if they were exactly synonymous; whereas they are not really so, and the explanation, and justification of the distinction, in the present dispute, will set the matter on a very different foot. It is not unity alone that constitutes the complex idea, or notion of the true God. There is, there can be but one such Being, and yet a monotheist may be as far from the knowledge of the true God as the rankest, and most superstitious polytheist. I have taken notice, in the precedent essay, how the belief of one God, and of many, was reconciled in the heathen theology several ways; and what I have touched transiently, may be seen made out fully in the intellectual system. A polytheist,
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who believes one self-existent Being, the fountain of all existence, by whose immediate or communicated energy all things were made, and are governed, and who looks on all those other beings whom he calls gods, that is, beings superior to man, not only as inferior to the Supreme, but as beings all of whom proceed from him in several subordinate ranks, and are appointed by him to the various uses and services for which he designed them in the whole extent of the divine oeconomy; such a polytheist, I say, will approach nearly to true theism, by holding in this manner nothing that is absolutely inconsistent with it: whilst the monotheist, who believes that there is but one God, and ascribes to this God, whom he should conceive as an all-perfect Being, the very worst of human imperfections, is most certainly ignorant of the true God, and as opposite to true theism as the atheist, nay he is more injuriously so. Mr. LOCKE would have done like himself, if he had made these reflections before he had joined in the common cry; and he might have thought, perhaps, in that case, that the coming of CHRIST was necessary to give the Jews true notions of God, as well as to convince the Gentiles of his unity.

INSTEAD of this, he takes the common opinion for granted, supposes what is in question, and does not so much as attempt a proof. He says indeed, that "there was no part of mankind — that had a greater light of reason, or that followed it farther in all sorts of speculations, than the Athenians; and yet we find, he adds, but one SOCRATES amongst them that opposed and laughed at their polytheism — and we see how they rewarded him for it." He quotes in the same place the reproach that St. PAUL made to this people. "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious, for as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." If these

these were meant for proofs of what he asserts, they were unluckily chosen. Matter of fact is mistaken in one, and in neither of them is there the least color of argument. SOCRATES was so far from opposing the religious worship established at Athens, that he held it to be the duty of every citizen to follow the religion established by the laws of his city, as we know upon good authority, that of XENOPHON; and if we turn to the Euthyphro. in PLATO, we shall find him declaring, in his zeal for polytheism, against all the traditions which he judged to be unworthy of the gods, tho they were believed, and respected by the vulgar. This was his crime. He neither opposed, nor laughed at polytheism, tho he certainly believed the unity of the Supreme Being. But the zeal of bigots in those days, as in ours, made it no less criminal to reject the abuses of religion, than to profess atheism; and a faction in the state took advantage of this, to put him to death.

BUT if we suppose, for argument sake, that he was put to death for opposing and laughing at polytheism, and idolatry; if the Athenians were superstitious, as they were undoubtedly, and if they dedicated an altar to the unknown God, what will all this serve to prove? It will prove only that men are apt, and even the most judicious sometimes, to erect their scanty knowledge of a few particulars into a supposed general, and certain knowledge of any subject. A little tract of land passes with them for the whole world, two or three nations for all mankind, and two or three thousand years for all antiquity. Are we able to compare the Athenians very exactly in this respect, or in any other, with the people who flourished at the same time, and of whom we have some accounts in history, and tradition? How much less are we able to compare them with so many other nations, of whom not so much as the names are come down to us, or were known to them? What

argument then can be drawn from the polytheism, idolatry, and superstition of this little state, to that of the whole world, which is the point to be proved? or from the Athenians in the days of SOCRATES, or St. PAUL, even to the Athenians themselves in the ages whereof the priests of Sais talked to SOLON: nay to the whole race of mankind in these, and still more ancient ages; for even these were not deemed the first?

I MIGHT leave the argument here, since the author of the reasonableness of christianity offers no other proofs of the facts he advances. But I think myself obliged to justify my opinion so contrary to his, and to that of the whole crowd of scholars, on whose authority he rests. Great men take great liberties, and expect to be believed on their words, and the disciples of Mr. LOCKE have as good a right, as the disciples of any philosopher, to use the *ἀντιδῶς ἔφη*. But for me, who cannot allow it to any in matters which I am able to examine, and who should think myself obliged to give my reasons even for agreeing with him in all such matters, it seems still more incumbent upon me to give those which induce me to differ from him; and I shall do so, without repeating much of what has been said by me already.

I HAVE said in the former essay, and I have given my reasons for it, that I do not believe mankind discerned the unity of God in the first dawning of knowledge. But the impressions of the Creator are so strongly marked in the whole extent of the creation, and the idea of an all-wise, and all-powerful Being, first cause of all things, is so proportionable to human reason, that it must have been received into the minds of men as soon as they began to contemplate the face of nature, and to exercise their reason in such contemplations; and this was long before the commencement of any traditions that we find out of the
books

books of MOSES. Prophane memorials shew us the whole world, and sacred memorials except the patriarchs, and the Israelites alone out of this dark scene, involved in polytheism, superstition, and idolatry. But still, both sacred and prophane concur in shewing us some gleams of light that break thro these clouds, some notices of the knowledge, and worship of the true God, that were kept up among the sons of men. They appear faintly, and very imperfect they were in these times, perhaps, early to us, tho late with respect to the beginning of our mundane, and human system. But still they appear, and give us sufficient reason to collect from their appearances, much more than they shew us immediately.

It is strange to observe how unwilling ecclesiastical writers and divines are to admit this truth; and it is often provoking to observe that they, who have no more pretence to be believed about their own religion, than the heathen writers about theirs, presume to contradict what the latter of these affirm about their faith, in opposition to the invectives of christian writers, tho they appeal to the antient doctors of paganism whom they do not appear to have interpolated, nor under whose names there is no pretence to say that they have imposed any spurious books on the world; both which accusations are evidently true of our christian writers in the first, and, as we commonly say, the purest ages of christianity. It is stranger still to observe how little regard the same persons pay, upon this head, even to the opinions of the greatest saints, and most learned men of their own church. I could quote many instances. Let one suffice. It shall be taken from St. AUSTIN, who answering a passage of FAUSTUS the manichæan *, wherein he makes the belief of one Supreme Being the common badge of pagans, Jews, and Christians, does not allow indeed that the Christians

* Lib. 20.

took the opinion of a divine monarchy from the heathens, but is forced to allow that these were not so given up to false gods, as to lose the belief of the one true God, from whom every kind of nature proceeds*.

THE polytheism, superstition, and idolatry of Egypt appear so monstrous in the light in which we view them, that they furnish the principal topics of every declamation against the theology of paganism; and yet I persuade my self, that the knowledge and worship of God in his unity, had prevailed even there in times unknown to us. Let it be considered that the Greeks, thro whom all our prophane anecdotes concerning this country have been conveyed, were not much acquainted with it, nor had resorted to it in search of knowledge till the reign of PSAMMITICHUS, that is, till seventeen or eighteen centuries after the establishment of this monarchy, dating this establishment only from MENES, and bringing him down as low as he is dragged by MARSHAM. THALES, SOLON, and PYTHAGORAS went thither nearly about the same time, in the reign of CROESUS at soonest; or in that of CAMBYSES at latest. By this chronology it appears, that an immense space of time, sufficient for many revolutions in religion and government, was elapsed before the Greeks had the means of being well informed about either; and the antiquities of Egypt might be as obscurely, and imperfectly seen by these first philosophers, who went thither, as the greek antiquities are by us. We may push this consideration farther, and suppose that the same polytheism, superstition, and idolatry that they found established in Egypt, were established there in the time of ORPHEUS, six or seven hundred years before, or even in the time of CECROPS, CADMUS, DANAÜS, or ERECTHEUS, who are said to have carried

* — Gentes non usque adeo ad falsos deos esse dilapsas, ut opinionem amitterent unius veri Dei, ex quo est omnis qualiscunque natura.

colonies,

colonies, letters, and civil institutions into Greece two or three hundred years sooner than ORPHEUS carried religious rites and mysteries thither: and there will remain still behind all these events, an antiquity more than sufficient for one revolution in theological opinions, and in religious worship at least, and perhaps for more than one.

I AM willing to grant more than EUSEBIUS, or any one else has proved, and yet this concession will only thrust the aera of egyptian polytheism and idolatry back into a greater antiquity. It will not give any grounds to assert, like EUSEBIUS, that the Egyptians were polytheists, and idolaters, or professed a sort of religious atheism from the beginning, nor that the Israelites alone knew, and worshipped the true God. It may lead us perhaps to opinions very opposite to these, and much better founded on prophane, for I shall not yet consider the sacred authority that is alledged for them, and that is more so in appearance than in reality. The more antient the establishment of polytheism and idolatry in Egypt is agreed to have been, the stronger the argument grows, that may be drawn from those notices that we have in our most authentic accounts of egyptian theology, of a purer faith and worship. The belief of one supreme, invisible, and incomprehensible Being, Creator of all things, must have been once firmly settled in the minds of that people, when so many ages of prevalent polytheism and idolatry were not able to root it out, nor to efface the traces of the worship of him. Public profession, and practice, the outward system of religion, was altered, and the purity of it corrupted many ways, and by different motives. But nothing except conviction could have preserved, from time immemorial, in the secret theology, or inward doctrine of the Egyptians, this fundamental article of all true religion, the existence of one Supreme Being, Creator, and Monarch of the universe, and
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this article was so preserved. Whatever errors the Egyptians, or their scholars the Greeks, admitted into their theology, this opinion tinged every theistical system: and even they who held the world to be eternal, like ARISTOTLE and others, held the world, and the deified parts of it to be so, not as self-existent, but as eternal effects of an eternal cause. ARISTOTLE argues in his metaphysics against the folly of supposing more principles than one, and nothing can be more express than the doctrine of PLOTINUS on this point, where he distinguishes between priority in the order of time, and priority in the order of nature, and makes the world coeval with God no otherwise, than as light is conceived to be coeval with the sun.

THE belief of one Supreme Being may appear the more evidently to have been that of the Egyptians, publicly professed in the most antient times of that monarchy, and held at all times in their secret theology, from this consideration, that it was brought from thence by the first of the Greeks, who went thither for instruction, and that the same doctrine was held by the last of those who had studied this philosophy. THALES, and PYTHAGORAS, to say nothing of PLATO here, who came long after, brought it into Greece, disguised indeed under hieroglyphical and mystical representations, but yet too plainly taught to be mistaken for the contrary doctrine. ANAXAGORAS made a more public use of it by his writings, and has gone away with the honor of being the first of the Greeks who introduced a nous, or mind, into the cosmopoeia. But THALES was of the same opinion as ANAXAGORAS, and EUSEBIUS quotes very unfairly what this philosopher said of water, as of the first principle of all things, without making any mention of that intelligence who framed all things of water according to THALES*. This notion of a fluid chaos, which we know to have been very general, by PLUTARCH and by other autho-

* Cic. de Nat. Deor. l. 1.

rities,

rities, was very mosaical too, and points up to an egyptian original. The founder of the ionic sect had it from thence most certainly, and MOSES too, if we give any credit to SIMPLICIUS, who scrupled not to declare, as I find him quoted by Dr. CUDWORTH, that the passages in the first of Genesis about the creation of the world were taken from egyptian traditions. He called them fabulous, because he was a zealous asserter of the eternity of the world. But his authority will not make them pass for such. MOSES, who had been instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, might believe them true upon much better grounds. Nay more, he might be directed, if you please, by inspiration to take from them his belief of the beginning of things. Upon the whole, it is plain that the Supreme Being, the maker of the world, was acknowledged by the egyptian theology at the first period that has been mentioned.

To prove that the same doctrine was derived from the same source, by the last of those who applied themselves to the study of egyptian theology, I shall content my self to bring JAMBLICUS forward; a very mysterious writer indeed, and yet plain enough to establish what we contend for. He answers the questions PORPHYRY had asked of ANEBO, under the name of ABAMMON the master of ANEBO. He was a Syrian, a very learned man, and much more capable, probably, than any Egyptian of that age to give a body of their divinity. Now we learn by the eighth section of the book he wrote on this occasion, that the egyptian philosophy supposed a multitude of essences, as they expressed themselves, and a multitude of different principles of these essences, from whence I am apt to think, that PYTHAGORAS borrowed his numbers, and PLATO his ideas. They carried their inquiries beyond all the bounds of human knowledge, and they disputed, as we do now, about words. But still it is manifest, that these essences, or principles, were deemed

deemed subordinate to the first cause; for before them all, and before their first god and king the sun, they acknowledged a Being, the fountain of all being, the root of all intelligible ideas. From this Being proceeded, according to this theology, "explicit se" in GALE's translation, that being who is his own father, sufficient to himself, the God of gods, the father of essences from whom all existence flows. This was the doctrine which MERCURIUS TRISMEGISTUS taught, and these were the principles he placed before the aetherial, empyreal, and celestial deities, concerning whom he wrote a great number of volumes. That this is a rhapsody of nonsense, I agree most readily. But it may not be less genuine for that, and it is sufficient for my purpose; since it establishes the unity of God even more precisely, and less mysteriously than the Athanasian creed.

THAT greek metaphysical refinements helped to render the egyptian theology less intelligible, I shall not controvert; tho he must pass for a dogmatical pedant, who presumes to affirm, that they did so, and pretends to be a competent judge of the matter. But sure I am, that the orthodoxy of it, in this great point, is better proved by this quotation from JAMBLICUS, than the supposed monstrous heterodoxy of it by any authority EUSEBIUS brings to justify his charge. He affirms very positively, in the third book of his evangelical preparation, that no other gods, besides the stars, were acknowledged even in the hidden theology of the Egyptians; that the creation of the universe was ascribed to the visible sun alone, and all things depended, according to it, on fatal necessity, and on the influence of the stars, without the intervention of any incorporeal being, any efficient reason, God, gods, or invisible intelligent natures. To maintain this stout assertion, he quotes a fragment of PORPHYRY's letter to ANEBO, and triumphs much in it, tho it makes nothing to his purpose. It proves that CHAËREMON, and some
other

other writers had induced PORPHYRY to doubt concerning this article of the egyptian creed, and that he writ to his priest to be informed of the truth. CHAEREMON was an egyptian, and had been a priest, as ANEBO was; for neither the comic poet, nor any other of that name, can be the person intended, as it seems to me. PORPHYRY might possibly know nothing more of him. His authority, therefore, appeared sufficient to make PORPHYRY inquire. But it was not sufficient to make EUSEBIUS affirm, in flat contradiction to so many better authorities, and even to his own in other places. This CHAEREMON, I believe, was he who had accompanied AELIUS GALLUS in his voyage from Alexandria higher up into Egypt, and had been derided for his ignorance and arrogance by the whole company. STRABO had been one of this company, and EUSEBIUS had read the seventeenth book of his geography, without doubt, wherein an account is given of this important person. It is shameful, therefore, to see him quoted for the true notions of egyptian theology. There were some philosophers and learned men in Egypt, very probably, in the time of CHAEREMON. But the colleges of those antient philosophers, under whom EUDOXUS and PLATO had studied, were desert; or if they remained, they were become seminaries of priests, who took care of sacrifices, performed the other rites of superstition, exercised all the craft of their order, and took no pains to improve themselves and others in knowledge. EUSEBIUS should have remembered, that if CHAEREMON's authority was good against the Egyptians, it was of some force and weight against the Jews, which he would have been as unwilling to admit as JOSEPHUS, who accused CHAEREMON for this reason of imposture, unless he had avowed in this case a maxim, which he and JOSEPHUS have done little else than avow in others, that the same testimony is good when it makes for them, and bad when it makes against them. EUSEBIUS should have remembered, when he

derided the comment of PORPHYRY on the verses attributed to ORPHEUS, and when he asked how the author, whoever he was, could sing of God, or mean that efficient mind that created the universe, who had never heard of any such doctrine? He should have remembered, I say, that he begged the question, and supposed what he had not proved against the pagans.

IT has been observed already, that the unity of a Supreme Being must have been once a first principle of egyptian religion, since it pierced thro such an immense series of polytheism, superstition, and idolatry. Here we may observe to the same purpose, that all the metaphysical and theological refinements of Egypt and Greece, were not able to remove this angular stone of true theism. When metaphysics and theology are made sciences, and these sciences become the professions of orders of men, who increase their consideration in the world, or advance their temporal interests by creating an appearance of mystery where there is none, or by increasing it where it is, the simplicity of religion will be lost of course, and natural theology will be transformed into artificial. We may find examples to confirm this truth in the christian system, and I much doubt whether the evangelists would understand the epistles of St. PAUL, tho one of them was his scribe, or St. PAUL the works of St. AUSTIN, tho the saint took so much of his theology from the apostle. This happened in the egyptian system of religion; but this fundamental article, the unity of God, was preserved, tho darkened and perplexed by the engraftments made upon it. Such were those which may be found in PLATO, and in the latter platonicians; such were those which I have, and others which I might have cited from JAMBLICUS. But in all of them the existence of a Supreme Being, the Being of beings, the God of gods, the fountain
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of all existence, the root of all intelligible ideas, was acknowledged.

MAY one not think, without being too hypothetical, that we see in the anecdote PLUTARCH * relates concerning the belief and worship of the people of the theban dynasty, the last stage of orthodox faith, and of natural religion in Egypt? They adored the one God eternal, invifible, not like to any vifible objects, nor to be represented by them. I use Mr. LOCKE's words, for if he had intended to describe this faith and worship from PLUTARCH, he could not have done it more exactly, and yet this is the description of that God who was not known, according to him, till the light of the gospel manifested him to the world. He might have asserted just as truly, that no men but the Jews knew how to read and write, before the coming of Christ, because many of them knew it ill, as they do to this day, and some of them did not know it at all.

AT what time the true God was thus publicly known and worshiped in the upper Egypt, it is impossible to determine. But we see in the history ascribed to MOSES, that he was known in the lower Egypt, and the neighbouring country of the Chanaanites in the days of ABRAHAM. The adventures of this patriarch and his son, when their wives were taken from them, are told in several chapters of Genesis a little confusedly, but however they serve to establish this fact. No man, who reads the twentieth chapter of Genesis, can doubt, whether it was the true God, or not, of whom the author meant to speak, and who appeared to the first of the ABIMELECHS in his sleep. It has been said, I know, on this occasion, that God manifested himself sometimes to those who were not in his alliance, or

* DE ISIDE & OSIRIDE.

covenant, but that he did this always for the sake of his own people. He did it then, at this time, to preserve SARAH'S chastity. Be it so. But still he manifested himself on this important occasion. The king of Gerar knows him, and appeals to his justice. God is pleased to declare that the king's intentions were not criminal, and that he had therefore kept him from the commission of the sin, a very unnecessary restraint, surely, since the king did not intend to commit it, since his intentions were not criminal. God commands, the king obeys, ABRAHAM intercedes, and ABIMELECH is restored to the power of begetting, and his wife and his concubines to the power of conceiving children. The same, or which is more likely, some other ABIMELECH had taken warning, and therefore as soon as he knew that REBECCA was the wife of ISAAC, he threatened death to any man, who should presume to lie with her, and bring so great a sin on him, and his people. He followed ISAAC to Bersabea, and there this king, his minister, and his general desired to make a solemn league with him, because they knew that the Lord was with him*. The reason they gave, to induce him to consent, was not only that they had done no hurt to him, nor his, but that they had sent him from Gerar, with the blessing of the Lord †. Is the true God pointed more directly out any where in the same book? Do not the ABIMELECHS acknowledge him, and conduct themselves, on this occasion, as one of the patriarchs might have done.

MELCHISEDECH must not be forgot in this place. A thousand idle guesses have been made, and various fables invented about him. St. PAUL, in his epistle to the Hebrews, shews great cabalistical skill on this subject, and grounds on such forced allusions as might pass in the school of GAMALIEL, the

* Tecum esse Dominum.

† Dimisimus auctum benedictione Domini. Gen. vi. 26.

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least conclusive reasoning that was ever heard out of it. The book of Genesis says little of this king and priest, but enough to shew, that the true God was known to others besides the Jewish line of patriarchs, and before the Israelites were a people. He was of Egyptian race, as some have asserted without any grounds, I believe, of history or tradition, but not without an air at least of probability. In all cases, he was priest of the most high God, as well as king of Salem. As such he blessed ABRAHAM; as such the father of the faithful received his blessing; as such he paid him the tithes of his plunder, which is a title, by the way, for carrying the divine right of tithes farther than the moderation of the church has hitherto carried it *. Since he was a priest of the true God, as well as king of Salem, or Jerusalem, are we to believe that his subjects were all idolaters? The supposition cannot be reconciled to common sense; and since it cannot, sure I am that the propositions I combat cannot be so, nay I have the authority of the bible on my side. I shall have it so again before I have done.

IF I would proceed now, as learned men presume to do very frequently, and without the least scruple, I might venture to affirm, on these foundations a little extended and improved, not only that the true God was known by the Egyptians, and by some of the people of Palestine before the vocation of ABRAHAM, but that this patriarch, who became the father of the faithful, tho' said to have been bred an idolater, learned this orthodox faith in Egypt, and the neighbouring countries, if he was so bred in his own. But I am not scholar enough to presume to affirm on wild conjecture. I dare go no farther than sufficient probability leads me, and sufficient vouchers support me. With these on my side, I might go on to shew,

* What is here said, is said on the authority of St. PAUL; for if we believe MOSES, it may be that MELCHISEDECH paid tithes to ABRAHAM.

that

that the unity of a Supreme God was taught both by the chaldaeans, and the magi, and might rest on the proofs brought by CUDWORTH in his intellectual system, by HIDE in his treatise concerning the religion of the antient Persians, and by other authors, leaving critics, who are not able to subvert the systems of these writers, to nibble at some particular circumstances. But I choose to leap at once to the extremity of the East, and to shew by anecdotes less common, that a nation, lately known, had, in as great, or even a greater antiquity, the same faith.

THE nation I mean is the Chinese, who will not be suspected, one would think, of having had any communication with the Israelites, tho I would not answer for such antiquaries as HUETIUS, nor others of that stamp. The Chinese have their pentateuch as well as the Jews, and one volume of it is as old as FOHI the founder of their empire. Two other volumes contain records as old at least as the deluge, and the two last are collections from other antient monuments published by CONFUCIUS, who lived six hundred years before CHRIST, and was therefore elder than ESDRAS. The chinese scholars, as proud of the antiquity of their nation as ever any of those who disputed formerly about theirs could be, might disregard our most antient traditions, and look on MOSES as a modern historian. They might found their incredulity on their credulity, and their positiveness on their ignorance; which is the general case of bigots in the West, as well as in the East. But for us, who have the happiness to live in this inlightened age, and who pretend to examine every thing, and to judge according to evidence, we should have no good grace to reject the classical books of the Chinese. They come to us upon as good original authority as that of the Jews, they contain as few things that are repugnant to the general observation and experience of mankind

kind as any other antient records, and much fewer than some; and they have been preserved in a manner that gives them a singular authenticity, into which I will not enter, because it would lead me far, and might cause some invidious comparisons*.

THIS authenticity is so well established, that the atheists in China are forced to submit to it, and tho' their advantage would be to reject these books, they endeavour, by all the artifice of sophistry, to drag a meaning out of them, which may seem to set the opinion of antiquity on their side. The antient fables among the Chinese, like those of other nations, delivered their doctrines in short apophthegms, in parables and allegories. They who followed were not so laconic, but even they dealt much in figure; and allegory allegorising allegory very often by way of explanation, the sense, which was at first obscure, grew to be worse than obscure. It grew to be litigious. The paraphrases and commentaries multiplied, the disputes increased, and the labor on every side has been to confirm different and opposite opinions, by different expositions of the same text. The language, as well as genius, of this people has helped to increase the confusion, not so much indeed as if these books had passed thro' several languages, but still a great deal from the scarcity of words, and the necessity of supplying this defect, when they speak by numberless inflections and tones of voice, and when they write by numberless points and accents.

A JESUIT, who restored the mission in the last century, after it had been some time interrupted by the authority of the government, took a method which it is to the present purpose to mention. He engaged in the dispute that was carried on between the theists and the atheists, and maintained in concert

* Vid. Scien. Sin. &c.

with

with the former, that the antient Chinese believed and worshiped one God. This God, the God of their fathers, denied by some, forgot by more, and almost unknown, he declared to be the God whose revelation, and whose will he came to publish among them. Neither he, nor those who followed him have made many real converts to christianity, nor persuaded that people to believe that his religion was in former times established amongst them, tho many pious frauds have been employed for that purpose. But in the other part, there has been less difficulty, and more success, for the state of the dispute seems to have stood thus.

A BEING called XAM TI, which words signify the Supreme King, appears in all their antient books to have been worshiped as the dispenser of temporal good and evil to mankind. FOHI offered victims, and HOAM TI built a temple to this divinity. From this time, that is from an aera anterior to any of ours, the same worship continued, together with religious rites practised in honor of inferior spirits*, who are sometimes called the ministers of the Supreme King, and who are said by one of the interpreters of CONFUCIUS, to exercise their offices "in hoc coeli et terrae medio," to bring blessings on the good, and punishments on the wicked. The book XU KIM says expressly, that their great emperor and legislator XUN sacrificed to XAM TI, and to the six principal spirits. Another classical book mentions a very antient edict, by which all the people are commanded to pay honor to the Supreme Emperor of heaven, and likewise to the spirits, that the spirits may intercede for the happiness of the people, "ut pro populo flagitent felicitatem." Such passages, and a multitude of others to the like effect, are found in the antient books of the Chinese, as we learn from the jesuits, from whom alone we can have any tole-

* VI. CONFUC.

nable

rable information, and it should seem that such authorities were sufficient to decide the controversy, and to leave no doubt whether the antient people of this country believed a God, or were atheists. But the men of letters among them at this time profess a sort of spinozism, to which they endeavour to reconcile these passages, and there are many examples in the “scientia finica” of the extravagant paraphrases they make for this purpose.

THE atheists insist, and the theists admit, that the word Tien, which signifies heaven, is frequently used now, and was so antiently as synonymous to the words Xam Ti. What the atheists would infer from thence is obvious, but by no means conclusive. Their forefathers imagined, as I believe that all the antient people of the world did, and as almost all the people of the world do still, that the habitation of God, and all celestial beings was above that canopy which appeared to be spread over their heads, and which they called heaven. From hence the custom arose of employing the word which signifies the place of residence, for the word that denotes the being who is supposed to reside in it. But the argument, that results from the promiscuous use of these words, will turn, according to my apprehension, directly against the use which the atheist would make of it. If the antient Chinese had acknowledged no higher principle than matter and form, no supreme intelligent Being, the words Xam Ti, far from being used as synonymous to the word Tien, would never have come into use at all. A man who should say at Peking, China declared war against the Tartars, or the emperor of China did so, would speak as intelligibly as a man at London would do, who should say Great Britain, or the king of Great Britain, declared war against France. But the same manner of speaking cannot obtain in a country that has neither emperor, nor king;

and no dutchman ever said indifferently this Holland did, or this the king of Holland did. This argument must be the stronger in the mouths of chinese theists; because in the same books, wherein the words we have mentioned are thus used, the separate existence of the spirits of mountains, rivers, and cities, and of the seasons, the sun, the moon, and the planets is taught: and yet these separate spirits, and the things over which they preside, are spoken of with the same licence. They are called indifferently the spirit of the mountain, or of the river, and the mountain or the river; nay the very same words that are employed to signify the fortifications of a city, are employed to signify the tutelary spirits of that city. On the whole we may conclude, that a Supreme Being was known to the antient Chinese, tho' superstition, idolatry, and atheism have been so prevalent among that people since. The sacrifices performed with so much order and pomp, so much reverence and religious awe, the fasts, the purifications, and the other acts of divine worship which were practised, were not performed and practised purely in honor of matter and form, nor directed to these vague ideas of the human mind. The empresses who nourished silk worms, and weaved ornaments for the altars; the emperors who plowed and sowed annually, and raised by the sweat of their brows the fruits of the earth, which they offered on those altars, acknowledged without doubt some other divinity than TAI KIE, and LI. Thus we must think, unless we can be as absurd as EUSEBIUS, and figure to our selves a sort of religious atheists, who acknowledging no deity besides dead and senseless matter, yet worshiped it, invoked it, and implored it's assistance. But this sottishness and contradictory nonsense CUDWORTH cannot believe incident to human nature*, and I presume to think that most men will be of the same mind.

* Intell. system.

SECTION II.

THE particular proofs that have been brought, or to which I have referred in this, and the foregoing essay, are sufficient to destroy the credit of the assertions to which they are opposed. But it may be proper to shew farther, that if there were no such particular proofs of the acknowledgment of the one true God by other nations besides the Israelites, yet the assumption that he was acknowledged by them alone, and that all other nations were polytheists and idolaters, from the beginning, would deserve to be rejected for it's absurdity; since it will be found inconsistent with the tenor of the mosaical history, when we take scripture for our guide, and with all the rules of judgment that observation, experience, and good sense suggest to us, when we consider the human character, and the course of human affairs. I am not surpris'd when I meet in BOCHART with such an assertion as this boldly advanced, that "there was no church before the deluge except "in the family of SETH," and that after the deluge, "till the coming of CHRIST, God made himself known to no people "except to those who were of the race of SEM*." But when I meet with such assertions as I have quoted from Mr. LOCKE, in an author who lays aside the comments and systems of divines, and betakes himself to the sole reading of the scriptures, I confess myself surpris'd, to the last degree, at the weakness of the strongest minds.

WE have nothing to do here with the antediluvian world. We leave the ecclesiastical history of it to BOCHART, and the natural to BURNET. But if we consult the bible for what passed after the deluge, and is to our present purpose, we shall find

* Geog. Sac. l. i. c. i.

that the knowledge of the one true God, derived to NOAH from ADAM by uninterrupted succession, and confirmed to him by many particular revelations, must have been common to him, and to his family, as much as those particular precepts which he is said to have received from the mouth of God, and which are called "praecepta noachidarum." The sons of NOAH, therefore, when they dispersed themselves to re-people the world, must have carried this knowledge with them, and have communicated it to their descendants, in all the settlements they made, and in all the colonies that were propagated from these.

THIS is so evident that it would suffer no dispute in any similar case: and yet for reasons not hard to find, nor proper to avow, it is denied in this. LACTANTIUS says *, that HAM the son of NOAH settled in Arabia, and that having not received the worship of God by tradition from his father, the nation he founded was the first that knew not God. A strange assertion indeed, and such an one as cannot be true, if the sacred history be so. We read there †, that the patriarch lying drunk and naked in his tent, and this ungracious son seeing him in that indecent condition, he told it to his brothers; that SEM and JAPHET went reverently backwards, saw not their father's nudity, and threw a cloak over him §. After this, NOAH pronounced the prophetic curse against CHANAAN, the son of HAM, who was to be the servant of the servants of his brothers ||; and this prophecy, it is said by BOCHART and others, had it's completion when the Chanaanites were subdued by the Israelites. But whatever criticisms good or bad may be made on it, and whatever reflection the punishment of CHANAAN,

* De Orig. Er. c. 4.

† Gen. ix.

§ — Patris virilia non viderunt.

|| — Servus servorum erit fratribus suis.

who

who had no share in his father's crime, may suggest, this gave the Israelites the sole title they had to the land of promise by the grant God made of it to the posterity of ABRAHAM, and was employed to justify all the cruelties they exercised on the Chanaanites.

THIS unfortunate person was not only punished in his race, as the prophecy threatened, but his name and memory are cruelly persecuted to this day by the unrelenting wrath of Jewish and Christian writers. Some have accused him of gelding his father, and some of committing incest with his mother. He was banished, they say, to the scorching climate of Africa, and the color of his posterity is a lasting monument of the blackness of his crimes. He not only preserved and propagated the necromancy which he had learned of the lascivious angels before the deluge *, but he became himself an object of idolatry, as he had been an idolater, and was worshiped under the name of JUPITER HAMMON. They who can believe all this, may believe that polytheism and idolatry were established immediately after the deluge. But they, who are not quite so credulous, will see that such opinions are irreconcilable to the scriptures, and to common sense. NOAH might be as angry as he pleased with his reprobate son, and might conceal from him as many traditions as he could, yet still this son had been an eyewitness of the deluge, he had been saved with the rest of the family in the ark, he had assisted his father without doubt in building it, and in making all the other preparations for that great catastrophe, as well as for the renewal of the species of animals, and the restoration of things afterwards. Is it possible to conceive, that he should not have heard, whilst they floated together over the drowned world, who that God was by whose power it was drowned, and what those crimes were which had

* BOCHART. Geog. Sac. l. 4. c. 1.

drawn

drawn this astonishing destruction on mankind? It is impossible. His father could not conceal this knowledge from him. HAM knew the one true God most certainly, and had often joined in the worship of him. He could no more be ignorant of God than he could be of the deluge.

THIS is so very plain, that it cannot be directly, nor generally denied, whatever expressions may be sometimes used by men whom learning emboldens, and zeal is apt to transport. But then the chronology, founded on the genealogies in the book of Genesis, supposes the tradition of these revelations, by which God communicated himself to man, to have been preserved so little a time after the deluge, that it gives a color to suppose all the nations of the world, nay even the descendants of SEM, ignorant of the one true God: and on this assumption, presumptuous dogmatical persons, who affect to be in the whole secret of the divine oeconomy, establish the reason that they assign by another assumption, for the election and separation of the posterity of ABRAHAM from all other people. Infinite wisdom, it seems, could contrive no other expedient for continuing the primitive faith and worship, for such that of the one true God was by these accounts, among the descendants of one family that had repopled the earth, except this of reviving them, and continuing them by such a series of revelations and miracles among one people, as would have made any revival of them unnecessary among any other; because they would have been more than sufficient to continue them uncorrupted over the whole world, not only till the vocation of ABRAHAM four hundred years after the deluge, not only till the coming of the Messiah two thousand years after that, but even to this hour, and to the consummation of all things.

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SOME place the aera of idolatry precisely at SERUG, who was three generations older than ABRAHAM. Sir JOHN MARSHAM thinks it a very proper date *. A probable one I am sure it is not, nor indeed a proper one for any purpose, except that of making mankind idolaters just in time for introducing the vocation of ABRAHAM. This might render it proper for EUSEBIUS, EPIPHANIUS, and all the tribe of Jews, and Christians who have employed every literary artifice to confine the knowledge and worship of God to the chosen seed, and to represent them as the sole object of providential care for twenty centuries. But I think that the learned and judicious chronicler has not deserved to be ranked among this partial and collusive tribe. We might call them the blind tribe too, since they must not have seen, unless you suppose that they saw, but depended on the blindness of a then ignorant world, that this knowledge and worship could not have been as confined as they suppose it from the time of the flood, unless God had by one continued miracle concealed himself to establish the kingdom of the devil, and altered the very nature of things to make so important, so universal, so indisputable a tradition die before it's time, and, as we may say, at once.

WHEN the same persons attempt to establish the credibility of the mosaical history, they do not insist alone upon the divine inspiration of the author, but upon the ordinary means that he had of knowing, with the greatest certainty, all that we find related in the pentateuch. These means were the traditions which they suppose to have come fresh and authentic to him thro a very small number of generations, tho from a very great antiquity. ADAM lived nine hundred and thirty years; and the deluge happened sixteen centuries and an half after the crea-

* Can. Chron. Sac. 4.

tion.

tion. NOAH therefore, who was born six hundred years before the deluge, had lived with those who had lived with the first of men. NOAH continued alive three hundred and fifty years after the deluge, that is within seventy six years of the vocation of ABRAHAM, and SEM the son of NOAH died just as many years after this vocation. From ABRAHAM the traditions passed to ISAAC, and from him to JACOB, and all the persons who had conversed with this patriarch could not be dead in the course of a century which intervenes between the decease of JACOB, and the birth of MOSES. Thus you see that the traditions from ADAM, to this legislator and historian, passed thro about seven generations, and from NOAH to ABRAHAM, and his cotemporaries, thro one or two at most, according to this chronology.

LET us take now this chronology for good, whatever objections may be made to it, or how precarious soever the principles of it deserve to be esteemed. But then let us ask every man of sense and candor who receives it, whether he can persuade himself that in the days of ABRAHAM, about four hundred years after the deluge, nay much sooner, in the days of SERUG, the existence of that God who had destroyed and restored the world, in so astonishing a manner just before, could be wholly lost in the memory of mankind? I say just before, with very good reason; because the distance of three or four centuries, when the lives of men were reckoned by centuries, may be called properly just before. The deluge was an event as modern to ABRAHAM, and the men of that age, as the restoration of King CHARLES the second is to us of this age. Could the belief and worship of God be lost by the descendants of SEM, an hundred years before the death of SEM? Could they be lost even during the life of NOAH? Is it possible to figure to ourselves the children of these holy patriarchs professing polytheism,
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and practising idolatry, under the eyes of their fathers, and ABRAHAM, for instance, educated in the religion of the zabians, a new name given by our learned men to the chaldaeans, after mahometan writers, whilst SEM was still alive? Once more: Is it credible in the lowest degree of credibility, that the chaldaeans, who were able to give CALISTHENES, two thousand years after the flood, astronomical observations of as great a number of years at least, should know nothing of the flood, of the occasion, of the author of it, in a word of the true God, in less than four centuries after it had happened? These improbabilities are so very monstrous, that it is marvelous any men should be hardy enough to impose them, or silly enough to believe them. When MAIMONIDES is gravely quoted to prove TARAH an idolater, I let my book fall with astonishment. As soon would I quote NAVARETTE, a spanish missionary, to prove that the first coin of which we have any knowledge, is that made by TARAH the father of ABRAHAM, at the request of king NINUS, and for thirty pieces of which JUDAS sold his master.

I KNOW that JOSHUA is introduced in the twenty fourth chapter of the book ascribed to him, speaking in the name of God to the children of Israel, and telling them that TARAH, the father of ABRAHAM and NACHOR, had served strange gods. Now that here and there a man might begin to corrupt the worship of the true God, even in these early days, is just credible. But that the true God should be unknown, and idolatry established, at that time, is what I affirm to be incredible. Let commentators puzzle over the text, or take the fact as they find it without any examination, it will become other men to believe, that something has happened to the jewish records, like that which happened to those of another antient people, the Phoenicians; and that if the scribes of the former

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have not corrupted their history, as PHILO BYBLIUS, who published a greek translation of SANCHONIATHON in the reign of ADRIAN, complains that the priests of the latter had corrupted theirs; we may suppose, at least, as some even of the jewish doctors have done, that the genealogies of the bible, far from being complete, are imperfect abstracts; or that they have been compiled, as father FOUQUET, at his return from China, where he had resided three and twenty years, assured me that the chronological table in the "scientia finica" had been. This table is composed of cycles of threescore years each, and all these cycles appear to us unbroken. But the learned jesuit averred, that in the originals many of them wanted the beginning, and many of them the end. So that the space of time to which this table refers could not be shorter, but might be immeasurably longer than the chronological table, his brethren had put together, represents it. In a word, it will become reasonable men to assume any hypothesis, rather than to believe, against universal experience, the least disputable analogy, and the plainest dictates of common sense, that the knowledge and worship of God were entirely forgot, whilst the preachers of both, and the eye-witnesses of the deluge, were still alive.

LET us believe, on the authority of MOSES, that God trusting neither to the impressions of himself that are visible on the whole face of nature, nor to the reason he gave to man, communicated this knowledge, and directed this worship by immediate revelations. But let us not be so absurd as to believe, on any authority, that so many signal revelations, and astonishing miracles, attested by evidence unquestionable, and delivered down by immediate, not remote tradition, could be forgot so soon, nor that they could be remembered, and the great truths they communicated, and confirmed, be forgot. All these must have continued strongly impressed on the minds of
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men much longer, even in the ordinary course of things. They must have continued to be so, not only in the countries where the re-peopling of the world began, but wherever the founders of nations led their colonies from thence, which they began to do in the days of PHALEG, that is about a century after the flood. If we believe, on the authority of MOSES, that God made himself known by revelations and miracles to all the men that were at a certain time in the world, and from whom all the nations of the world descended, we cannot believe, on the same authority, because we cannot believe consistently with it, that his being and his worship were unknown to any of these, or forgot by any of them in the course of a very few years. The same authority would be made thus to contradict itself. In the case of another history, we should say that neither might be true. But in the case of this we may say that both cannot. The first is a plain, independent fact, that must be reputed true on the whole, whatever disputes may arise about circumstances, or the history must be reputed fabulous. But the other depends on a chronology very liable to mistakes, and not affecting the truth of the former. That famous astronomer, CASSINI, took the pains to calculate backwards a remarkable eclipse, or two, that are mentioned in the antient chinese annals. He found that such eclipses had been, but the dates were not exact. Just so we find that the one true God was eclipsed, if I may use this expression; but tho the eclipse lasted long, and lasts to this hour in some parts of the world, it could not begin so early, nor spread so universally as some men would induce us to believe. Will it be said that the confusion of languages, which began at once in the plains of Sennaar, and was followed by the dispersion of mankind into all the parts of the earth, as the story is generally, tho erroneously understood, interrupted or corrupted tradition, and gave occasion to the immediate establishment of polytheism and idolatry?

latry? But the argument to be drawn from this famous event will prove the very contrary. Tho' languages were confounded, memory was not destroyed, and the knowledge which had been common to all men whilst they lived together, and formed but one community, was continued, and delivered down in different languages after this division. The knowledge was dispersed, as those who had it were dispersed; and the same truths were taught then as they are now, in different tongues. Nay farther, this very confusion and the dispersion of mankind, which were brought about in so miraculous a manner, and by an immediate act of the same omnipotent Being who had so lately destroyed, and now restored the world, would have become, if this had been the case, the strongest confirmations imaginable of the truths that were known before; and with the renewal, and confirmation of these truths in their minds, the sons of men would have settled themselves in several countries, and have given beginnings to the several nations. Among these, therefore, and in opposition to truths so well known, and so signally confirmed, it was not possible that the zabians, and the magians, and every other sect of idolaters should arise, till by a long tract of time, and a multitude of revolutions in the affairs of mankind, true primitive traditions, and genuine theism began to decay together. Then, and not till then, might priestcraft prevail, which Mr. LOCKE esteems an obstacle to the progress of true religion, and which I believe, on principles founded in the mosaical history, to have been the great corrupter of it after it had been established. I might easily illustrate, and confirm these opinions, which are both true relatively to different times, and different places, by examples drawn from history, and even from the experience of our own age, from what passes in countries where the propagation of christianity is attempted by missions, and in those where this religion is already established.

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SOMETHING stronger than this may be objected to me. It may be said, that whilst I argue on probable reasons, and endeavour to shew that the true God, and the true worship of him, could not be forgot, nor polytheism and idolatry be established as soon as they are said to have been, among the nations of the world, I do not enough consider what passed among God's chosen people, in instances where no supposition of anachronism will help me to evade the force of scripture authority. Some pert divine may bid me descend a little lower in the history of the bible, and learn there how short the duration was, even among this people, of those impressions which revelations and miracles should have rendered permanent, and almost indelible, according to me, even among the other people of the world who were left to walk in their own ways. I do so again, as I have done already often, and I find that the posterity of ABRAHAM, or the children of ISRAEL, as they were called, after that some mysterious person or other had changed the name of JACOB who wrestled him at wrestling, into that of ISRAEL; I say, I find that they were become idolaters before their deliverance out of Egypt, confirmed, hardened idolaters, and so accustomed to the manners, and wedded to the superstitions of the Egyptians, that however MOSES drew them forth as a separate people, there seemed to be, as EUSEBIUS * himself confesses it happened he knew not how, no perceivable difference between them and the Egyptians. This may well appear the more surprising, if it be true, according to the common reckoning, that JACOB died less than two centuries before the exode, that JOSEPH died about fifty years after his father, and that LEVI had not been dead so long when AARON was born, and MOSES after him. How this could happen, neither EUSEBIUS was able to account, nor is any man else. Dr. SPENCER †

* Praep. Evan. l. 7. c. 8.

† De Leg. Heb. rit. l. 1. c. 1.

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takes pains to prove the fact, and it is something odd to see the authority of EUSEBIUS and THEODORET, of MAIMONIDES, and R. JUDA superfluously employed to confirm what the bible had proved in several places to his hand. But when he goes about to reconcile the fact to some notion of reasonable probability, he succeeds still worse, and does as much too little, as he had done more than enough. The learned writer thinks, that if this people had been treated in a better manner by the Egyptians, they could however have hardly avoided taking up the barbarous manners of that nation to which they had been so long accustomed. But he argues, "à fortiori," that this was inevitable, because they endured a cruel servitude in Egypt, and because such a servitude renders men little attentive to religious matters, and disposes them to conform to the manners and genius of their masters*. Now the very reverse of this maxim, and this reasoning, seems to me to be true. The fear of stripes may produce, whilst it continues, such a conformity in outward shew, but it can dispose men inwardly to embrace the manners and opinions, religious, or others, of their tyrants, no more than it can dispose them to love their persons, and even the appearance of such a conformity will cease whenever the slavish estate ceases. It will not only cease, but the slaves become freemen will throw off every badge of their slavery, and prefer the manners and opinions of those especially by whom they are delivered, to such as they professed thro fear, when they were under the lash of their taskmasters, "pugnis
" fustibusque saevientes. †" Tyranny may make hypocrites, it can never make profelytes. Whoever has studied the human nature, and been careful to observe the course of human affairs, must think it repugnant to both, not only that the Israe-

* Tam servilis autem, et infaelix vivendi conditio, hominum animos angustos reddere solet, rerum coelestium curâ vacuos, et in dominorum suorum mores et ingenia pronos. Ibid.

† Ibid.

lites should forget the traditions of their fathers, and the God of ABRAHAM, of ISAAC, and of JACOB, in so short a time; but that they should have been as much wedded to idolatry, as the Egyptians themselves were.

BUT if this be strange, it is stranger still to observe how little effect revelations of public notoriety, occasional, and constant or standing miracles before the exode, at the exode, in the wilderness, in the promised land, under their judges, and under their kings, had on the same people. They forgot the true God, even whilst he conducted them visibly thro the desert. They revolted from him whilst the peals of thunder, that proclaimed his descent on the mountain, rattled in their ears, and whilst he dictated his laws to them. All the power that omnipotence could exert was not sufficient to revive in the minds of this stubborn generation, the faith and piety of their fathers, nor a due and lasting sense of that religion which they had certainly followed, for some time at least, after their settlement in Egypt: and Dr. SPENCER therefore might have termed their manners barbarous with much more reason than he applied that epithet to those of the Egyptians*. As the means of conviction, and the motives of submission to the religion that MOSES instituted, continued, and increased, so did the indocility, and apparent incredulity of this elect people. Neither the promises, nor the threatenings, the rewards, nor the punishments, by which God endeavoured to attach them to himself, neither his condescension in wearing their crown, and in governing them like an earthly monarch till they deposed him, nor his constant residence even after his deposition among them, could succeed. They were proof against miracles to such a

* *Israelitas, sub prima incolatus aegyptiaci tempora, scientiae divinae lampada à patribus acceptam habuisse, et religionem avitam integram et illibatam diu tenuisse, nobis facile persuadeamus. Ibid.*

degree,

degree, that there would not have been more room for surprize, if we had been told, that NOAH and his family served strange gods even in the ark, than there is to find, in the history of this people, that they revolted back to idolatry nine hundred years together on every occasion. This history, in short, contains many particular miracles which operated effectually against the ordinary course of nature, physical and moral, and at the same time the whole thread of it is a system of miracles ineffectually operated, for a purpose so natural, that every one of them seems to make the next unnecessary.

IF the divine now should ask me, after all that I have owned in favor of his argument, whether that which happened at, and after the exode, might not happen after the deluge? whether the families that repeopled the earth at this period, might not forget the true God, and his worship immediately after it, notwithstanding any traditions, as we see that God's chosen and favorite people did during their bondage in Egypt, and as they continued to do very frequently from that time till the babylonian captivity, notwithstanding the miraculous advertisements, and the interpositions of providence ever watchful to prevent these apostacies? If the divine, I say, should ask me such questions, my answer would be this. The history of the bible tells me, that these things passed as I have represented them. But I know that they are repugnant to universal experience, and I have a conscious certainty that they are so to the human nature. Look into the history of the world, reverend sir, and you will find too many examples of pretended revelations, of forged miracles, and of groundless traditions, that have prevailed among mankind from age to age, to leave it in your power to think that unexceptionable revelations, real miracles, and certain traditions, could be ever ineffectual. Nothing less than the greatest of all miracles could make them so, and who should work such

such a miracle? Not God most certainly; for those which were disappointed of their effect, you say, were wrought by him. Was it then the devil? But how came he to have such a power, and to be suffered to exert it in such a case? I know farther, most intuitively, that no creature of the same nature as I am of, and I presume the Israelites were human creatures, could resist the evidence of such revelations, such miracles, and such traditions as are recorded in the bible. Look into yourself, reverend sir, and you will find it to be so. God appearing in all the terrors of his majesty, and his prophets denouncing judgments which were instantly, and literally fulfilled, to mention these particulars alone out of many, must have roused the most stupid, have terrified the most audacious, and have convinced the most incredulous.

SUCH an answer as this might procure me in return some ecclesiastical billingsgate. I might be called infidel, deist, and perhaps atheist. I should be accused certainly of disbelieving the holy scriptures. My reply to so angry a disputant would be calm, and such as might teach charity to those who preach it so much, and practise it so little. "Ne faevi magne sacerdos." I do not so much deny the truth of the facts related, as I oppose the application, and the use made of them. You argue from the conduct of the Israelites to that of other nations, and would persuade us, that all these might be polytheists and idolaters from the beginning; because the true God, and his worship were forgot so soon, and so often by his chosen people. But I deny that any such analogy will hold good. The Israelites were a people set apart from the rest of mankind, and indeed so set apart, and so distinguished, that the proceedings of God towards them, and their behaviour towards God, and towards man, make all together such a series of history as can be compared with no other; such an history as

shews us this people, but leads us to judge by analogy of no other. In prophane history we acquire experience of mankind, and of human affairs. The benefit we reap from it consists in this, and by this general knowledge we judge of every particular history that we read. In sacred history we acquire none of this experience. It is the history of a people not only set apart from the great community of mankind, but in many respects taken out, as it were, of the human system. To make the events recorded in it serve as foundations, therefore, of the judgments we pass on those that may have happened among other people, is just as absurd as it would be to make a collection of miracles, that is, of events out of the ordinary course of nature, and even repugnant to it, serve as the foundation of natural and experimental philosophy.

LET us believe then what is in the bible, because it is there. Not like TERTULLIAN, because it is impossible, or absurd; but altho it be improbable, or inconsistent. At the same time let us not apply the extraordinary events that we find there, to such as happen in the ordinary course of human affairs. Much less let us apply our own observation and experience, by which we judge very properly of other histories, to that of the bible. That of the bible must stand on the bottom of its own authority, independently of all other; and I am persuaded that nothing has shaken this authority more than the silly attempts of some writers to confirm it by arguments drawn from the reason of things, that is, from a comparison of ideas derived from human observation and experience. It seems to me, that divines should rest the authority both of the old and new testament on the proofs they are able to bring of their divine original, and of the uncorrupt manner in which they have been conveyed down to latter ages, solely.

To

To establish the credit of other histories, for I consider the bible here only as an history, it is not indeed sufficient to ascertain the authors of them; because these authors, being men, may have been deceived, or may have designed to deceive. For this reason their internal, as well as external proofs of authenticity are examined, and they are received, or rejected, as they appear consistent or inconsistent, conformable or repugnant to the observation and experience of mankind. But this second examination is unnecessary, when the question is about the word of God, known to be such by evidence superior to all contradiction, or it is impertinent and prophane. If we could suppose the authenticity and divine original of the scriptures destitute of sufficient external proof, this deficiency would not be supplied by all the skill of those who pretend to discover, by their superior penetration, the internal proofs. If the authenticity and divine original of them be, on the contrary, sufficiently established by external proof, it is both impertinent and prophane to pretend to confirm divine testimony, by shewing that there is reason to believe it true. Reason has been too much employed where it has nothing to do, and too much neglected where it has most to do. Men have believed implicitly, when they should have reasoned, in laying the grounds of faith; and they have reasoned dogmatically, when they should have believed implicitly, these grounds being once laid.

A MAXIM has been established in theology, which may be brought to justify this proceeding against me, and the authority of St. AUSTIN may be brought to justify the maxim. But the authority of common sense, much better than that of St. AUSTIN, will justify me in saying that the maxim is false. The maxim is this, that miracles themselves are not to be admitted as proofs of a divine original, unless the cause, for which they are wrought, appears to us to be good, and therefore not till the

doctrines they attest have been examined. By a parity of reason it may be said, that altho the external evidence which proves the scriptures of divine original, be full in that respect, yet the internal evidence must be sought for in them to make their authenticity complete in every respect. This maxim, and this way of reasoning were taken up perhaps very properly at a time when reports of miracles were easily believed, when every supposed magician was thought to perform them, and when they, who would not allow the pretensions of APOLLONIUS THYANEUS, for instance, who was opposed by the pagans to CHRIST, and who was worshiped as a god with CHRIST, ABRAHAM, and ORPHEUS by the emperor SEVERUS, were obliged however to acknowledge his miracles. But the case is widely altered, and it is as improper to insist on this maxim now, as it might be proper then. We know now that miracles, real miracles, can be operated by no power but that of God, nor for any purpose, by consequence, but such as infinite wisdom and truth direct and sanctify. We know therefore that no fact, nor doctrine, repugnant to the divine nature and attributes, can have been vouched by miracles, nor be taught in the word of God: and the difference is great between rejecting any such facts, or doctrines, and the authority on which they are founded, as in the case of the alcoran, for instance, and refusing to admit all the facts and doctrines contained in a book proved by undeniable testimony of the fact to be the word of God; till, besides this external proof, divines have furnished the internal proofs they boast of, which are often the wildest hypotheses of imagination, and such as a doctor of Mecca would hardly frame in behalf of the alcoran. Vain triflers! They pretend to develop the whole secret of a divine oeconomy relative to man; and tho it be so easy to discern what is evidently inconsistent with the divine attributes, that every reasonable man is able to discern it, yet these men are not stopped by such evidence.

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evidence.

dence. The presumptuous habits of theology carry them to talk of the plan, which they suppose infinite wisdom to have formed, as if they viewed it from an higher stage of intelligence, and knowledge. From these whimsical paradoxes, they derive the greatest part of what they call the internal evidence of the scriptures. On the whole, it is, I hope, plain by this time, that far from disbelieving the history of the bible, I assert the authority of it, and endeavour to place it out of the reach of cavil, whilst the divine does the contrary; for by taking the same liberty as he takes, and which every other man has the same right to take, some will pretend to find internal evidences of an human, where he pretends to find those of a divine original: and thus the authenticity of the scriptures, instead of being once for all fixed, will be rendered by theological ostentation a matter of eternal dispute. But still I deny, that the example of the Israelites at, and after the exode, under their judges, and under their kings, furnishes any argument against me. All the facts contained in the mosaical history are true; be it so, at least for argument sake: but consistently with them I may believe, nay consistently with them I cannot believe otherwise, in opposition to Mr. LOCKE, and to all those who went before him in asserting what he asserts, that mankind could not be polytheists and idolaters from the beginning, no, nor near the beginning, and consequently that the belief and worship of the one true God could not be the national religion of the Israelites alone.

LET us consider now what will result from another hypothesis. We suppose then that men acquired without any revelations, general or particular, and by a due use of their reason, a knowledge of the one true God. That they might acquire it by these means, in former ages, cannot be denied with any sort of modesty, or candor; since we are able to demonstrate
invin-

invincibly this great truth by the same means: and if they might acquire it, on what pretence can it be said that they did not? Modern philosophy has opened a more glorious prospect of the works of God than that which the antient nations appear to us to have had, and every new discovery adds to the magnificence of the scene, and to the force of the argument. But the great author of nature was always visible in every part, even the most minute, of the system of nature; and they who were far from seeing as much of it as we see, tho' we too are far, very far surely, from seeing the whole, might easily observe an unity of design, which pointed out most evidently the unity of that Being by whose wisdom the design was laid, and by whose power it was executed. All I assume therefore is, that among creatures to whom God has given sense and intellect, there have been many at all times who not only saw like the rest what was visible, but who discovered by reflection and contemplation what was intelligible, and yielded to the testimony God has given of himself. On this assumption we shall find reason to believe that genuine theism could be at no time confined to any one people, and that it must have been at different times, and in different places discovered, established, corrupted, lost, and renewed, according to the vicissitude of human affairs.

WE represent the first communities of men roving about in herds, like some other animals, and such as we see many of the savage people of the world at this hour. As long as they continued in that state, the unity of God might be unknown to them; because, reason operating much more slowly, and especially in such a state, than the affections and passions of our nature, a multitude of superstitious notions, arising from ignorance and fear, could not fail to take possession of the minds of these men, and to prevent, or misguide their reason. All the

the objects that furrounded them were new to them, and as they had not the experience of others to direct their judgment concerning the impressions which these objects made upon them, so their own experience came too late. The prejudices of superstition had rendered them unattentive to it, or unfit to make a reasonable use of it, before it came. But this could not continue, even on this hypothesis, to be long the universal state of mankind.

TO NATIONS were civilised, wise constitutions of government were framed, arts and sciences were invented and improved, long before the remotest time to which any history, or tradition extends; and all this could not have been done without much more information of the moral and physical system of the world, and much greater efforts of human reason than were necessary to demonstrate the first principle of true theism. Let us conclude, therefore, on grounds of the highest probability, that God was known to such as made a due use of their reason, and demonstrated by them to others, even in nations unknown to us; and since he was known, that he was worshiped; for to say he was known and not worshiped, is little less absurd than it would be to say he was worshiped and not known.

BUT tho God was known and worshiped, it will not follow that this knowledge and worship were preserved, or even established any where in all the purity of theism. Were they so among the Israelites, who retained so many of the rites, and ceremonies, and superstitious opinions of the lower Egypt? tho they believed the unity of God, and abhorred idols, like the people of the upper? In short are they so at this time? Are they so among us? It has been observed in the foregoing essay, and I have just touched the same thing in this, that the seeds of superstitious opinions and practices having been sowed before

fore nations were formed, or governments established, it is not unreasonable to believe that the first legislators cultivated them for political purposes. Nay even such as were neither polytheists, nor idolaters themselves, for it is very reasonable to suppose there were some such, might nurse up an abundant crop of superstition by the very means by which they designed to promote true religion. This we shall not think improbable if we consult history, or if we consider it analogically to the experience of our own age. To work effects contrary to the intention of them, is a fate that attends very frequently the best of human expedients, and the reflection does no honor to our wisdom and foresight. Private ambition grew up naturally among those who intended nothing more by promoting religion, than the political purposes of government, and the enthusiasm of superstition arose still more naturally among those who promoted it, because they believed in it. Both these motives contributed to corrupt genuine theism, to disguise first, and to conceal afterwards, the simplicity of natural religion under the tinsel, and the embroidery of polytheism and idolatry. From both of them proceeded so many false pretences of revelation and inspiration, the legerdemain of miracles, and such blasphemous affectations of a divine nature, or mission, as the indian FOE, or the arabian MAHOMET imposed on a great part of mankind.

THAT men are capable of falling from the knowledge of the one true God into polytheism, and from a pure worship of him into idolatry and superstition, by such means as I have mentioned, and by others, whether this knowledge and this worship were communicated to them by revelation, or discovered by the use of reason as other truths are, this very reason as well as experience will evince. But the difference between the hypothesis which assumes, that the unity of the Supreme
Being

Being was taught by revelation alone, confirmed by miracles, and delivered down by tradition; and the hypothesis we go upon here, which assumes that this truth might be discovered by reason as well as by revelation at all times, and therefore must have been discovered at some times by those who had no other guide but reason, deserves to be considered a little more.

THE proposition which affirms that all the nations of the world, except the Israelites, were ignorant of the true God from the beginning, is, in many respects, to the last degree absurd. It implies that the Israelites were a nation from the beginning. But were they so, if we reckon from ADAM, or even from NOAH, or even from the vocation of their father ABRAHAM? If they were not so, why are they excepted as such from the beginning out of the assumed general ignorance of mankind concerning the true God? Some divines will tell us, that the God might be discovered, yet he could not be fully and certainly discovered, nor such as he is, by reason alone. That he was pleased, therefore, to discover himself by immediate revelation, not to the bulk of mankind, but to patriarchs, to prophets, and to his chosen people, both when they were a family and when they were a nation. That he has revealed himself ever since in the same manner, and to the same persons, that is, to his elect, in the scriptures; which help them, says CALVIN in the sixth chapter of the first book of his institution, like spectacles to read distinctly and clearly what others discern confusedly and imperfectly. But they who compare the ideas and notions concerning the Supreme Being that reason collects from the phaenomena of nature, physical and moral, which we know to be the works of God, with those that the books of the old testament, which we suppose to be his word, give us, will be apt to lay these spectacles aside, and to conclude that

the God of ABRAHAM, ISAAC, and JACOB cannot be that glorious supreme all-perfect Being whom reason shewed them, and whom they discerned with their naked eyes. But again: What do those words, all the nations of the world, signify? If we understand them literally, they affirm what it is impossible the affirmers should know to be true. If we understand by them, as we are apt to do, a few nations only, such as were formed on the first re-peopling of the world by NOAH, and his immediate descendants, they affirm what is still more improbable. In a word, this proposition stands in direct contradiction to the other, which is part of the same hypothesis; for if the knowledge of the true God was communicated by revelation, and propagated by the first men who were witnesses of this revelation, according to the mosaical account, the true God must have been universally known in the beginning, and from the beginning. This needs no proof, it is self-evident; and they who will maintain that the nations of the world were ignorant of the true God from the beginning, with any consistency, must give up MOSES; and instead of assuming such a revelation, and a tradition in consequence of it, they must admit that all men were ignorant of the true God, till some of them discovered this great truth by philosophical observation and meditation, and communicated it to others, as it is said that ABRAHAM did.

THEY may suppose, as much as they please, that the tradition was worn out, and the knowledge lost entirely, in less time than would have been sufficient to destroy the memory of the most trifling events, and the least important opinions; even this will not save their hypothesis. On the supposition of such a revelation, and of such a tradition, it would be still absurd to assert, that all the nations of the world were ignorant of the true God from the beginning; as it would be hard, on the sup-
position

position that this knowledge was ever entirely lost among men, to account for the belief of one Supreme Being, which prevailed in the esoteric, or secret doctrines of philosophers, whilst their exoteric, or public doctrines, were favorable to polytheism. All this, a general ignorance, and a particular knowledge, can be accounted for no other way than by admitting, not only that the knowledge of one Supreme Being is to be acquired by reason, without the necessity of any revelation, or of any miracles to impose it, and that it has been so acquired in the improved, tho' not in the original state of mankind; but also that it may be, and has been established in general and national belief, at certain times, and under the influence of favorable conjunctures among several antient nations. The authority of revelation, if God revealed himself to men in any other manner than by his works, being conveyed down by tradition, and this tradition being spent in a long tract of time, and by the various accidents which happen according to the course of human affairs, nothing would remain to keep up, or to renew, this belief in the minds of men. But the authority of reason ceasing to be exerted, or ceasing to prevail, reason would still remain, and be at hand to renew this belief, and propagate it again in a more happy season. Revelation descends like a torrent, and bears down all before it, whilst the tradition of it is fresh and strong. But this force diminishes gradually; the stream grows feeble, and ceases at last to run, by a necessity arising from the nature of things. The stream whereof reason is the source, may be obstructed in it's course. It may creep scarce perceived in the same channels, for it may disappear entirely; but when it rolls no longer on the surface, it runs under ground, and is ever ready to break out anew.

OUR physical and moral systems are carried round in one perpetual revolution, from generation to corruption, and from

corruption to generation; from ignorance to knowledge, and from knowledge to ignorance; from barbarity to civility, and from civility to barbarity. Arts and sciences grow up, flourish, decay, die, and return again under the same, or other forms, after periods which appear long to us, however short they may be, compared with the immense duration of the systems of created being. These periods are so disproportionate to all human means of preserving the memory of things, that when the same things return, we take frequently, for a new discovery, the revival of an art or science long before known. It is much the same with opinions, and even with many demonstrated principles of knowledge. The most absurd of the former come into public vogue, as well as the most evident of the latter; and the latter go out of it again, as well as the former. Let us descend into some particulars that may serve to illustrate what is here said.

WHEN we look into the history of the Greeks and Romans, how ignorant do these people appear to have been in the art of navigation? In what cockboats was the fate of the war decided at Salamis? What idea must we have even of the carthaginian fleets, when we see them vanquished by a people whose skill had gone, till the first punic war, little farther than hollowing trees into misshapen and unwieldy canoes*? How slow was the progress of this art afterwards? Confined to the Mediterranean, and attempting little and seldom the Ocean, obliged in both to cling to the shore †, the stoutest of their ships of war would have foundered where a Deal yawl rides securely. Shall we conclude now from these representations, that they shew us the beginning of navigation? No. We see in them the decay of the art. To inquire critically into the voyages of BACCHUS, of HERCULES, of JASON; to fix the times when these heroes flourished, or when MINOS held the dominion of the sea, would be imperti-

* Caudicariae naves.

† Legere et radere littus.

ment industry. It is enough to know, that tho the Greeks were frightened at the flux and reflux of the sea, that new and astonishing phaenomenon to this knowing people, even at the time of ALEXANDER'S expedition, the indian ocean, rough as it is, had been explored long before by merchants who sailed from the coast of Arabia and Egypt. If HERCULES erected his columns at the mouth of the Streights, the Phoenicians passed beyond them. They visited the coasts of Portugal, the fortunate islands, or the Canaries, and even the utmost Thule; perhaps the other hemisphere, and the islands, at least, which COLUMBUS had the honor of discovering some thousands of years afterwards. The ships of MIDACRITUS, or MELCARTUS, traversed the bay of Biscay, and brought lead or tin "ex cassiteride insulâ," probably from Cornwall. This we learn from obscure tradition, and what do we see in the clearer light of history but the restoration of this very art? We have spoke of an art. Let us speak now of a science.

ASTRONOMY had made a low figure among the Greeks for some time before HIPPARCHUS, who lived about the time of the sixth or seventh of the PTOLEMY'S; and tho we hear much of the fame of THALES, of PYTHAGORAS, and EUDOXUS, yet astronomy and astrology, which we distinguish very properly, were in those days confounded together. Men were much more attentive to discover the imaginary influences of the stars, than to observe their real motions: and the honors done to BEROSUS by the Athenians, for his divine predictions, shew us in what manner, and to what purposes this science was cultivated a little before HIPPARCHUS, that is, in the time of ALEXANDER. HIPPARCHUS invented mathematical instruments for observing the celestial phaenomena, and observed, it is said, very accurately. PTOLEMY, another astronomer, came after him, and tho he made some pretensions to astrology, as others had
done,

done, yet he was an astronomer in the proper sense. He improved on the improvements of HIPPARCHUS, and the system which bears his name was universally received. It continued to be so till COPERNICUS arose. But if we conclude from hence, that we see the whole rise and progress of astronomy, or that COPERNICUS was the author of a new system, we shall be much deceived. We see astronomy in its decayed and corrupt state, and we see it recover from thence, and return back to its true principles. The beginnings of it, among the Egyptians and the Chaldaeans, if in truth it did begin among them, the progress they made, and the degree of perfection to which they carried it, are unknown to us. But besides several probable reasons, which determine us to think that they carried it very far, we know certainly that the true solar system, which COPERNICUS discovered about two hundred years ago, was taught in the pythagorean schools above two thousand years ago, and was by consequence that of the schools of Egypt and Babylonia.

To speak now of opinions, and of the self-evident, or demonstrated principles of real knowledge: the former fluctuate perpetually. When one of them alone can be true, a thousand that stand in direct opposition to one another are entertained. Whilst they last they are unsteady. Time and experience explode them often; and when they return into use again, they are seldom exactly the same. The latter are fixed and uniform. Time and experience confirm them, they cannot be exploded, they may be unknown, or they may be forgot; but whenever they are perceived by the mind, far from degenerating into opinions, they are perceived by every mind alike. Thus, I think, we are to understand that axiom of the stoician BALBUS, "opinionum commenta delet dies, naturae judicia confirmat." It may be, it has been said, that the latter part of this axiom is often contradicted by experience, and that false demonstrations
have

have taken often the place of true, as opinions merely probable, nay improbable, have passed among whole nations for the most demonstrated truths. But I suspect that this has been the case in appearance rather than in reality, or that the exceptions are too few to invalidate the general rule. Truths that may be called properly the judgments of nature, because they are conformable to the nature of things, and have been deduced from thence by a process of reasoning in every step of which the mind has had intuitive knowledge, cannot be removed, they must be confirmed by time, the nature of things, and the reason of men continuing the same. But these very truths may be so disguised by opinions which are thought to be compatible with them, which muffle them up, and which cling to them, tho they be parts of them no more than cloaths are parts of body, that the same principle of real knowledge professed by different people, or at different times, appears to be a different principle. If DRAGORAS, or THEODORUS, or VANINI, or any other particular atheist, for a community of atheists never existed out of Mr. BAYLE'S head, had been asked, whether it is not the interest of every individual to submit to government, and to promote the good of society; or if any theist had been asked, whether this be not the duty, as well as interest of every individual, they would all have answered in the affirmative, and have assented to these first principles of public and private morality. Notwithstanding this, what a variety of opinions has there not been about this interest and this duty? They have been so various, as well as the practice of men consequent from them, that whoever considers his own, or past ages, may be tempted to think, that in some countries the obligation of submitting to government is esteemed unconditional, and illimited; and in others, no obligation at all; or that, as he sees no country wherein the common duties of society are enough observed, so there are others wherein every man deems himself an individual, independent by nature,

nature, and disavows any such duty. Suppose now that in one of these countries liberty be established on a system of law, equally distant from tyranny, and from licentiousness. Suppose that in another such a reformation of manners be wrought, no matter by what means, that the duties of morality are practised in it universally, and with the utmost exactness, shall we conclude from these examples, that in the former case the principles of public, and in the latter those of private morality, were never known, or had been lost, and were then demonstrated anew? Shall we not rather conclude, according to the truth of things, that these principles have been always known, and that the new establishment, and the new reformation do nothing more than strip them of the false opinions which were so complicated with them, that men derived their institutions and notions, not from the sure judgments of nature, but from the false comments of opinion *?

THUS again, the existence of one supreme, self-existent, and all-perfect Being, the first intelligent cause of all things, was acknowledged, as we discern more or less clearly by almost all our antient traditions, in those nations who had any pretence to be esteemed civilised, and most directly and explicitly in those that were the most enlightened by knowledge. But yet this bright and luminous truth, this judgment of nature, was clouded by such a multitude of superstitious notions, that it appeared dubiously, and that something which seemed repugnant to it might have been objected to every nation who professed it in their outward, or even in their secret doctrine. An orthodox Israelite was scandalised, no doubt, when he beheld

* N. B. There is a passage in POLYBIUS worth being turned to on this occasion. It is in the thirteenth book. He observes there how truth is disguised, or concealed by the false opinions of men; but he insists, that these last for a time only, and that truth prevails always.

among

among his heathen neighbours their deceased kings and heroes erected into divinities, and adored as such. But we may assure ourselves, that an inhabitant of Thebes in Egypt, who acknowledged no god but the unborn eternal KNEPH, or even a polytheist, who worshipping many gods, that is, inferior divinities, acknowledged still one Supreme Being, the monarch of gods and men, was not less scandalised when he saw this Being, of whom he had the sublimest conceptions that the mind of man can frame, degraded into the rank of a local tutelary divinity, the God of ABRAHAM, of ISAAC, and of JACOB, the God of one family, and one nation, of a family who had strolled into Egypt for bread, of a nation who had been long slaves in that country. In vain would the learned priests of all sides have explained their symbolical rites, and mystic doctrines. The Israelite would have remained convinced, that the one true God was unknown to the heathen; and the heathen, that he was unknown to the Israelite. It fared with this principle of knowledge, as PLUTARCH observes in one of his miscellaneous tracts, in the manner that it fares with the virtues. The prudence of ULYSSES appeared different from that of NESTOR, and the justice of CATO from that of AGESILAUS. The same principle of knowledge, derived from the same use of reason, took various appearances from the various opinions that were complicated with it in the minds of men, much as the same virtue took a different hue, according to the different tempers, characters, and circumstances of those who professed and practised it.

THIS seems to have been the state of things till the coming of CHRIST. Whether the knowledge and the worship of the one true God were taught by revelation, or by reason, that which is affirmed concerning them cannot be true. In the first, case they must have been known from the beginning by all the people of the earth, and long before the Israelites grew up to be a nation.

In the second case, the man who should assert, that ABRAHAM, or any other of the patriarchs, was alone able to make these discoveries by dint of reason, and philosophical reflection, would not deserve a serious answer. Nay further, if we go upon the first supposition, that of revelation, if we take the words of some divines, that this belief and worship could be communicated no other way to mankind, and that this sacred deposit was trusted to a people chosen to preserve it till the coming of the Messiah, this assumption will appear as little conformable to the reason of things, as several others are which the same men advance to be parts of the divine oeconomy, and for which they appeal to the reason of mankind. Reason will pronounce, that no people was less fit than the Israelites to be chosen for this great trust on every account. They broke the trust continually, and the miracles that were wrought to preserve it, notwithstanding their apostacies, would have preserved it at least as well all over the world. Besides the revelations made to them were “shut up in a little corner of the world, amongst a people, by that very law which they received with it, excluded from a commerce and communication with the rest of mankind,” as Mr. LOCKE * observes very truly. A people so little known, and contemned, and thought vilely of by those nations that did know them, were therefore very “unfit, and unable to propagate the doctrine of one God in the world.”

BUT wherefore, then, was this deposit made to them? It was of no use to other nations before the coming of CHRIST, nor served to prepare them for the reception of his gospel; and after his coming, it was in this great respect of little use, if of any, to the Jews themselves. They believed universally one God, but they were not universally disposed to believe in his son. Monotheism might indispose them to the gospel, as well as their attachment to the law of MOSES. The expectation of the Messiah did not clash

* Reaf. of Christ.

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with monotheism. But they might imagine, that the belief of God the son, and God the holy Ghost did so very manifestly; the trinity not having been early reconciled to the unity of God. Other nations seemed to be better prepared by philosophy, by that of PLATO in particular, and by the polytheistical notions of divine natures, some in the godhead, and some out of it, for the reception of the gospel, or of the theology which the preachers of the gospel taught. Accordingly we find, that when CHRIST came, and threw down the wall of partition, if he did throw it down, and not St. PAUL, the miracles wrought to propagate christianity had greater effect out of Judaea than in it. On the whole matter, it is impossible to conceive, on grounds of human reason, to what purpose a divine oeconomy, relative to the coming of CHRIST, should have confined the knowledge of the true God to the Jews, and have left the rest of mankind without God in the world. On the other side, if men discovered the Creator of all things by their observations and their reasonings, things must have passed much as the memorials of antient times give us grounds to believe that they did pass. The knowledge of the true God must have been uncertainly propagated, and uncertainly maintained; it must have been never lost, but always liable to be darkened by too much ignorance and stupidity in some, and too much imaginary knowledge, and the endless refinements of opinion in others.

THAT our Saviour found the whole world in a state of error concerning this first principle of natural religion, tho not of absolute darkness, is allowed; and that the spreading of christianity has contributed to destroy polytheism and idolatry is true. But that, which Mr. LOCKE advances to have been the consequence of this great event, is not true. It is not true, that God has been made known to the world by this revelation, with such evidence and energy, that polytheism and idolatry have been no where able to
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withstand it. On the contrary, orthodox theism has not prevailed in some countries where it has been taught. In others, christianity has been established on the ruins of polytheism and idolatry, and has been rooted up again in its turn. Revelation has had no better success than reason. Neither has been able to preserve the purity of the doctrines they taught, nor an uniformity in the practice they prescribed. Nay mahometism, a religion instituted by an arabian free-booter, who imposed himself for a prophet of God, and composed that extravagant rhapsody of superstition and enthusiasm, the Koran, has been further propagated than christianity, and that not by the sword alone, no more than christianity. MAHOMET and the first caliphs established their religion by the success and terror of their arms. But since that time it has been extended by spiritual conquests, and not only the conquered, but the conquerors, for such the Turks were, have embraced it. CHRIST, his apostles, and the first preachers of christianity, established this religion by their miracles, and by their sufferings. But since that time it has been propagated and preserved by violence as great, at least, as that which the Saracens employed to establish the other. But however, and by what means soever, these religions have been extended, that of MAHOMET has taught the unity of God in terms so clear, and so precise, as to leave no room for any opinions that may be so much as strained into polytheism; and has so effectually banished all kinds of images, that the most gross and superstitious of the vulgar cannot have the least occasion of sliding into idolatry.

CHRIST found the world in darkness and error. But if he was to come again, would he not find it in the same state? Would he find even the religion he came to establish, either practised, or even taught in its genuine purity? Would he not find the decalogue shortened, and the creed lengthened, by some Christians? Would he not find the creed shortened by others,
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who left the decalogue of the same size, even by Mr. LOCKE himself? Christianity has been from the institution of it in a perpetual flux, not relatively to certain opinions alone, that may be deemed indifferent, or not quite essential; but relatively to fundamental articles, on which the whole system leans. Let me produce one instance, which will illustrate, and confirm, what has been said against those who take so much pains to make us believe, that polytheism and idolatry prevailed among the nations of the world from the beginning. Arianism had very nearly prevailed in the christian church. It was all that intrigue could do to check, and all that wars and persecutions, wherein millions perished, could do to extirpate this heresy. Let us suppose now that these salutary methods had proved ineffectual, and that the orthodox faith was at this time creeping about in corners, as the arian faith actually is, and was preserved only by a few rational and thinking men, who were vain, in their outward profession and worship, to go with the herd, and to keep to the religion established by law; I ask, would it be fair to conclude, that the orthodox faith had never been the faith of the christian church, and that this abominable heresy had been established from the beginning? It would not be so most certainly. To recapitulate, therefore, and to conclude: I think it plain, that the knowledge and worship of the one true God must have been the religion of mankind for a long time, if the mosaical history be authentic, and was not therefore confined from the beginning to the family of SEM, nor to the Israelites who pretended to be of it. I think it plain, that the assumed confinement of this orthodox faith and worship could answer no imaginable design of a divine oeconomy, preparatory to the coming of CHRIST; since the Jews, who had it, were not better prepared than the Gentiles, who are said not to have had it, to receive and embrace the gospel; and since this doctrine was propagated much more by heathen philosophers

losophers than by Jewish doctors. I think it plain, that if we suppose the unity of God to have been discovered by reason, and to have been propagated by human authority merely, the belief of it must have gone thro all the vicissitudes, and have been exposed to all the corruptions that appear to have attended it. I add, that we have the less reason to be surpris'd at this, or to doubt of it, since we see that very faith, which God himself came on earth to publish, which was confirmed by miracles, and recorded by divine inspiration, subject to the same vicissitudes, and the same corruptions.

ESSAY