

L E T T E R VIII.

FROM the BISHOP of LANDAFF to THOMAS PAINE.

[*Concluded from page 389.*]

YOU want to know why Jesus did not shew himself to all the people after his resurrection. --- This is one of Spinoza's objections: and it may sound well enough in the mouth of a jew, wishing to excuse the infidelity of his countrymen: but it is not judiciously adopted by deists of other nations. GOD gives us the means of health, but he does not force us to the use of them; he gives us the powers of the mind, but he does not compel us to the cultivation of them: he gave the jews opportunities of seeing the miracles of Jesus, but he did not oblige them to believe them. They who persevered in their incredulity after the resurrection of Lazarus, would have persevered also after the resurrection of Jesus. Lazarus had been buried four days, Jesus but three: the body of Lazarus had begun to undergo corruption, the body of Jesus saw no corruption; why should you expect, that they would have believed in Jesus on his own resurrection, when they had not believed in him on the resurrection of Lazarus? When the pharisees were told of the resurrection of Lazarus, they, together with the chief priests, gathered a council, and said --- "What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: --- then from that day forth they took counsel together to put him to death." The great men at Jerusalem, you see, admitted that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead; yet the belief of that miracle did not generate conviction that Jesus was the Christ; it only exasperated their malice, and accelerated their purpose of destroying him. Had Jesus shewn himself after his resurrection, the chief priests would probably have gathered another council, have opened it with, What do we? and ended it with a determination to put him to death. As to us, the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus, which we have in the New Testament, is far more convincing, than if it had been related that he shewed himself to every man in Jerusalem; for then we should have had a suspicion, that the whole story had been fabricated by the jews.

You think Paul an improper witness of the resurrection, I think him one of the fittest that could have been chosen; and for this reason --- his testimony is the testimony of a former enemy. He had, in his own miraculous conversion, sufficient ground for changing his opinion as to a matter of fact; for believing that to have been a fact, which he had formerly, through extreme prejudice,

judice, considered as a fable. For the truth of the resurrection of Jesus he appeals to above two hundred and fifty living witnesses; and before whom does he make this appeal? --- Before his enemies, who were able and willing to blast his character, if he had advanced an untruth. --- You know, undoubtedly, that Paul had resided at Corinth near two years; that, during a part of that time, he had testified to the jews, that Jesus was the Christ; that, finding the bulk of that nation obstinate in their unbelief, he had turned to the gentiles, and had converted many to the faith in Christ; that he left Corinth, and went to preach the gospel in other parts; that, about three years after he had quitted Corinth, he wrote a letter to the converts which he had made in that place, and who after his departure had been split into different factions, and had adopted different teachers in opposition to Paul. From this account we may be certain, that Paul's letter, and every circumstance in it, would be minutely examined. The city of Corinth was full of jews; these men were, in general, Paul's bitter enemies; yet, in the face of them all, he asserts, "that Jesus Christ was buried; that he rose again the third day; that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve; that he was afterwards seen of above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part were then alive. An appeal to above 250 living witnesses, is a pretty strong proof of a fact; but it becomes irresistible, when the appeal is submitted to the judgment of enemies. St. Paul, you must allow, was a man of ability; but he would have been an idiot, had he put it in the power of his enemies to prove, from his own letter, that he was a lying rascal. They neither proved, nor attempted to prove, any such thing; and therefore we may safely conclude, that the testimony of Paul to the resurrection of Jesus was true; and it is a testimony, in my opinion, of the greatest weight.

You come, you say, to the last scene, the ascension; upon which, in your opinion, "the reality of the future mission of the disciples was to rest for proof." --- I do not agree with you in this. The reality of the future mission of the apostles might have been proved, though Jesus Christ had not visibly ascended into heaven. Miracles are the proper proofs of a divine mission; and when Jesus gave the apostles a commission to preach the gospel, he commanded them to stay at Jerusalem, till they "were endued with power from on high." Matthew has omitted the mention of the ascension; and John, you say, has not said a syllable about it. I think otherwise. John has not given an express account of the ascension, but has certainly said something about it; for he informs us, that Jesus said to Mary --- "Touch me not; for I am not yet *ascended* to my father; but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I *ascend* unto my father and

and your father, and to my GOD and your GOD." This is surely saying something about the ascension; and if the fact of the ascension be not related by John or Matthew, it may reasonably be supposed, that the omission was made, on account of the notoriety of the fact. That the fact was generally known, may be justly collected from the reference which Peter makes to it in the hearing of all the jews, a very few days after it had happened --- "This Jesus hath GOD raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being *by the right hand of God exalted.*" --- Paul bears testimony also to the ascension, when he says, that Jesus was *received up into glory.* As to the difference you contend for, between the account of the ascension, as given by Mark and Luke, it does not exist; except in this, that Mark omits the particulars of Jesus going with his apostles to Bethany, and blessing them there, which are mentioned by Luke. But omissions, I must often put you in mind, are not contradictions.

You have now, you say, "gone through the examination of the four books ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and when it is considered that the whole space of time, from the crucifixion to what is called the ascension, is but a few days, apparently not more than three or four, and that all the circumstances are reported to have happened near the same spot, Jerusalem, it is, I believe, impossible to find, in any story upon record, so many, and such glaring absurdities, contradictions, and falsehoods, as are in those books." — What am I to say to this? Am I to say that, in writing this paragraph, you have forfeited your character as an honest man? Or, admitting your honesty, am I to say that you are grossly ignorant of the subject? Let the reader judge. — John says, that Jesus appeared to his disciples at Jerusalem on the day of his resurrection, and that Thomas was not then with them. — The same John says, that after *eight days* he appeared to them again, when Thomas was with them. — Now sir, how *apparently three or four days* can be consistent with *really eight days*, I leave you to make out. But this is not the whole of John's testimony, either with respect to *place* or *time* — for he says — After these things (after the two appearances to the disciples at Jerusalem on the first and on the eighth day after the resurrection) Jesus shewed himself again to his disciples at the sea of *Tiberias*. The sea of Tiberias, I presume you know, was in Galilee; and Galilee, you may know, was *sixty or seventy miles* from Jerusalem; it must have taken the disciples some time, after the eighth day, to travel from Jerusalem into Galilee. What, in your own insulting language to the priests, what have you to answer, as to the *same spot Jerusalem*, as to your *apparently three or four days*? — But this is not all. Luke, in the beginning of the Acts, refers to his gospel, and says

says - - "Christ shewed himself alive after his passion, by many infallible proofs, being seen of the apostles forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of GOD:" — instead of *four*, you perceive there were *forty* days between the crucifixion and the ascension.

I need not, I trust, after this, trouble myself about the falsehoods and contradictions which you impute to the evangelists; your readers cannot but be upon their guard, as to the credit due to your assertions, however bold and improper. You will suffer me to remark, that the evangelists were plain men; who, convinced of the truth of their narration, and conscious of their own integrity, have related what they knew with admirable simplicity. They seem to have said to the jews of their time, and to say to the jews and unbelievers of all times—We have told you the truth; and if you will not believe us, we have nothing more to say.—Had they been impostors, they would have written with more caution and art, have obviated every cavil, and avoided every appearance of contradiction. This they have not done; and this I consider as a proof of their honesty and veracity.

John the baptist had given his testimony to the truth of our Saviour's mission in the most unequivocal terms: he afterwards sent two of his disciples to Jesus, to ask him whether he was really the expected Messiah or not. Matthew relates *both* these circumstances: had the writer of the book of Matthew been an impostor, would he have invalidated John's testimony, by bringing forward his real or apparent doubt? Impossible! Matthew, having proved the resurrection of Jesus, tells us, that the eleven disciples went away into Galilee into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them, and "when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted."—Would an impostor, in the very last place where he mentions the resurrection, and in the conclusion of his book, have suggested such a cavil to unbelievers, as to say—some doubted? Impossible! The evangelist has left us to collect the reason why some doubted:—the disciples saw Jesus, at a distance, on the mountain; and some of them fell down and worshipped him; whilst others doubted whether the person they saw was really Jesus; their doubt, however, could not have lasted long, for in the very next verse we are told, that Jesus came and spake unto them.

Great and laudable pains have been taken by many learned men, to harmonize the several accounts given us by the evangelists of the resurrection. It does not seem to me to be a matter of any great consequence to christianity, whether the accounts can, in every minute particular, be harmonized or not; since there is no such discordance in them, as to render the fact
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of the resurrection doubtful to any impartial mind. If any man, in a court of justice, should give positive evidence of a fact; and three others should afterwards be examined, and all of them should confirm the evidence of the first as to the fact, but should apparently differ from him and from each other, by being more or less particular in their accounts of the circumstances attending the fact; ought we to doubt of the fact, because we could not harmonize the evidence respecting the circumstances relating to it? The omission of any one circumstance (such as that of Mary Magdalene having gone twice to the sepulchre; or that of the angel having, after he had rolled away the stone from the sepulchre, entered into the sepulchre) may render an harmony impossible, without having recourse to supposition to supply defect. You deists laugh at all such attempts, and call them priestcraft. I think it better then, in arguing with you, to admit that there may be (not granting, however, that there is) an irreconcilable difference between the evangelists in some of their accounts respecting the life of Jesus, or his resurrection.—Be it so; what then? Does this difference, admitting it to be real, destroy the credibility of the gospel history in any of its essential points? Certainly, in my opinion, not. As I look upon this to be a general answer to most of your deistical objections, I profess my sincerity, in saying that I consider it as a true and sufficient answer; and I leave it to your consideration. I have, purposely, in the whole of this discussion, been silent as to the inspiration of the evangelists; well knowing that you would have rejected, with scorn, any thing I could have said on that point: but, in disputing with a deist, I do most solemnly contend, that the christian religion is true, and worthy of all acceptation, whether the evangelists were inspired or not.

Unbelievers, in general, wish to conceal their sentiments; they have a decent respect for public opinion; are cautious of affronting the religion of their country; fearful of undermining the foundations of civil society. Some few have been more daring, but less judicious; and have, without disguise, professed their unbelief. But you are the first who ever swore that he was an infidel, concluding your deistical creed with—So help me God! I pray that God may help you; that he may, through the influence of his holy spirit, bring you to a right mind: convert you to the religion of his Son, whom out of his abundant love to mankind, he sent into the world, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

You swear, that you think the christian religion is not true. I give full credit to your oath: it is an oath in confirmation—of what?—of an opinion.—It proves the sincerity of your declaration

claration of your opinion ; but the opinion, notwithstanding the oath, may be either true or false. Permit me to produce to you an oath not confirming an opinion, but a fact ; it is the oath of St. Paul, when he swears to the Galatians, that, in what he told them of his miraculous conversion, he did not tell a lie : " Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not."—Do but give that credit to Paul which I give to you, do but consider the difference between an opinion and a fact, and I shall not despair of your becoming a christian.

Deism, you say, consists in a belief of one God, and an imitation of his moral character, or the practice of what is called virtue ; and in this (as far as religion is concerned) you rest all your hopes.—There is nothing in deism but what is in christianity, but there is much in christianity which is not in deism. The christian has no doubt concerning a future state ; every deist, from Plato to Thomas Paine, is on this subject overwhelmed with doubts insuperable by human reason. The christian has no misgivings as to the pardon of penitent sinners, through the intercession of a mediator ; the deist is harrassed with apprehension lest the moral justice of God should demand, with inexorable rigour, punishment for transgression. The christian has no doubt concerning the lawfulness and the efficacy of prayer ; the deist is disturbed on this point by abstract considerations concerning the goodness of God, which wants not to be intreated ; concerning his foresight, which has no need of our information ; concerning his immutability, which cannot be changed through our supplication. The christian admits the providence of God, and the liberty of human actions ; the deist is involved in great difficulties, when he undertakes the proof of either. The christian has assurance that the Spirit of God will help his infirmities ; the deist does not deny the possibility that God may have access to the human mind, but he has no ground to believe the fact of his either enlightening the understanding, influencing the will, or purifying the heart.

LIFE OF PHILIP MELANCTHON.

[Continued from page 395.]

CHAP IV. *The Providence of GOD watches over the Affair of the Church. Strange notions respecting the Reformation. Some Account of Luther. Licentiousness of Pope Leo X. He has Recourse to the Sale of Indulgences. Tetzels vend them in Saxony. Luther opposes Tetzels — Publishes Ninety five Theses and begins the Reformation. The Servants of God poorly rewarded for their Labours. Remarkable Dream of the Elect*