

REASONS FOR FAITH

IN

REVEALED RELIGION.

[PRICE ONE SHILLING.]

Entered at Stationers' Hall.

REASONS FOR FAITH:

A LETTER TO

JOHN HOLLIS, ESQ.

SIR,

SINCE you have thought fit to publish your doubts and objections to Revealed Religion, you will naturally expect the public attention to be excited, and will not, I flatter myself, be displeas'd to receive any answer, dictated by a spirit of candour, and expressed in moderate and respectful language:—requisites claimed by the temper and stile of your publication, if there were no veneration due to the name of HOLLIS.

Your doubts will engender others; and your name and talents will give a weight and consequence to scepticism, which may extend its influence. If my replies should not give *you* satisfaction, if they are of use to others, by checking the influence of your dangerous speculations,

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lations, and in confirming wavering believers, my time will not be ill bestowed, nor my reasonings in vain.

The candid manner in which you state the workings of your own mind, and the progress of your opinions, does you credit; and more especially your manly and honourable resolution no longer, 'by a solemn and public act,' to declare yourself to be a christian, while you disbelieve Christianity. Would to God your example were in this respect more followed! and that men would not assume this honourable name—this 'highest stile of man'—without the least claim to it, either in their principles or conduct!

While I commend your candour and ingenuousness, permit me to remark another principle, which seems to have been the parent of your scepticism, and to have led to the successive changes of your opinion.

'During a course of years,' it seems, you conceived yourself 'to be a *rational* believer.' When the term *rational* is applied to faith, as respecting the grounds and authority on which we believe, it is well: we ought not to receive any scheme as a divine revelation without the most clear and convincing evidence: but when Reason is made
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the sole judge of the articles of that revelation, after we are satisfied of its authority, I conceive she is placed in an office to which she is not competent; so that I do not wonder at the defection of such believers as make their own reason alone the test and criterion of truth. In opposition to this, permit me to state to you the method in which I was led to embrace that religion you have discarded.

Revealed religion being founded on written documents, the first thing to be investigated, is their authority. If that can be proved divine, by arguments which appear satisfactory and unanswerable, we ought not to reject the doctrines they contain, merely because they are in some things mysterious, and above our reason, or because we find it difficult, or even impossible, to reconcile them to our philosophy, and preconceived opinions. In all our affairs we pay great respect to credible testimony, and rest concerns of the first importance in this life upon it. Doctrines, if true, are but facts expressed in the form of propositions; and ‘if we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater!’ For my own part, even reasoning *a priori*, I should expect to meet with difficulties, incomprehensibles, and even apparent inconsistencies,

in a Revelation from above, and that for these reasons:

1. Comparing myself with the Supreme Being, and my own weak intellect with Omniscience, I very naturally conclude, that many truths, which it may be useful for me to know, and proper for me to credit, may be above my limited comprehension, and inscrutable to my weak reason.

2. Examining the book of nature, which has been very properly called the "Bible of Creation," I there, among some very obvious truths, meet with many difficulties, and several things which I can neither reconcile to each other, nor to my own notions of what they should be. To give an instance: 'The Earth is filled with the goodness of the Lord—he preserveth man and beast—and giveth to all their meat in due season.' This commands my admiration and my gratitude; but when I consider that, by the same divine constitution, the various classes of creatures subsist by torturing and devouring one another:—when I see the tyger attack the helpless kid, the falcon the harmless lamb, and the spider the silly fly, and ask, Who is the author of those cruel propensities?—What can I say?

say? I cannot reconcile this with my ideas of justice or propriety, much less with those of infinite goodness and compassion.—I take up the volume of Revelation with the expectation of similar difficulties, and am not shocked at finding them.

3. When I read the discordant opinions of philosophers and naturalists, on some of the most familiar parts of ‘the *material* word of God,’ it prepares my mind for similar discrepancies among the interpreters of Revelation; and I neither reject the one or the other on this account.

Having thus stated the probability, that a divine revelation might contain difficulties, I proceed to examine those you have found in the Christian Revelation; after which, I shall offer some reasons for believing, derived chiefly from the same topics which have furnished you with reasons for scepticism.

I. Your first and grand objection to the Christian Revelation, is derived from its *doctrine* of FUTURE PUNISHMENT, compared with that of *philosophical necessity*, and contrasted with the known *benevolence* of the Deity.

I agree

I agree with you, that the punishment of *Hell* is represented in the New Testament to be final; and that the hopes which some have entertained of the restoration of the damned, are *visionary*, and have not sufficient foundation in the scriptures*. This I admit to be a very awful, and even *shocking*, representation of the future state of sinners; especially when it is considered, as you have shewn, that the far greater part of adult mankind are, and have been, walking in the broad road that leads to this destruction!—Being thus far agreed, I proceed to shew wherein we differ.

1st. We differ in respect of the number, and proportion of those finally lost. You suppose a vast majority of the human race, (according to the christian scheme) eventually miserable †; but seem to forget that one half of mankind, at least, die in *infancy* or childhood.

The Scriptures, (as I have elsewhere endeavoured to shew ‡) independent of rational arguments, give us sufficient reasons to believe that all these are certainly saved; and to them may be added

* Reasons for Scept. p. 7.

† Ibid. p. 6, 7.

‡ *Infant Salvation*, an Essay to prove the salvation of all who die in infancy.

added *ideots*, and others, who, like them, are incapable of discerning good from evil.

I hope also, that many deductions might be made for persons, whose lives indeed have been irreligious, but who were converted in the hour of sickness and death. The scripture gives us some such instances, and observation many more.—I also flatter myself with a great number of exceptions in the heathen and unenlightened world; not so much among the philosophers, (most of whom were vain sophists) as among the simpler classes. The poor Hindoo, the untutored Indian, the oppressed Negro, if at any time they have directed their cry to heaven with the heart, and in the language of the publican, have I doubt not been heard by him, who is no respecter of persons;—for ‘in every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him * †.’

But

* Acts x.

† That I may not be charged with a novel and unwarrantable attempt to soften the *gloomy* system of Calvin, as it has been called, I beg leave to subjoin the following short extract from one of its most zealous and celebrated defenders.—‘Why are Calvin’s doctrines represented as *gloomy*? Is it gloomy to believe that the *far greater part* of the human race are made for endless happiness? There can, I think, be no reasonable doubt entertained, concerning the salvation of very young persons. If about one half of mankind die in *infancy*,—if a very considerable number of the remaining half die

But beside all these, we are encouraged to look forward to a period of at least a thousand years, and that at no great distance, when the situation of the world will be greatly altered, and when instances of irreligion and infidelity will be as few, as now are instances of piety and faith*. These considerations greatly alter the objection, so far as it respects the number of the miserable: and sufficiently demonstrate that the whole company of the redeemed will be indeed a multitude which no man can number!

But if we farther indulge ourselves in the pleasing conjectures of modern astronomers, and suppose the innumerable systems of starry worlds to be inhabited by pure and happy intelligences, then,

‘ die in early childhood,—and if (as there is the strongest reason to think) *many millions* of those, who live to maturer years, in every successive generation, have their names in the book of life: then what a very small portion, comparatively, of the human species, falls under the decree of preterition and non-redemption!

‘ And I might have added, that the purpose of God according to election, is not restrained to men either of any particular country, or age, or time, or religious denomination. Undoubtedly, there are elect *Jews*, elect *Mahometans*, and elect *Pagans*. In a word, countless millions of persons, whom Christ hath redeemed unto God, *by his blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.*’ Rev. v. 9.—*TOPLADY’S Christian and Philosophical Necessity*, p. 120; 121.

* Rev. xx.

then, perhaps, as Dr. *Doddridge* observes, ‘ the whole human species may be no more in the works of God, than an individual to the human race * ;’ and, consequently, the finally miserable may bear a still less proportion to the happy.

2. We differ in our ideas of the *nature* and *degree* of future punishment. You speak of the punishment of hell, as extreme and terrible, and so it is ; but you seem not to have accurately observed the just apportioning of degrees of punishment, according to the degrees of crime, when every man shall be ‘ rewarded according to his works,’ and some ‘ beaten with few,’ and others with ‘ many stripes †.’—You seem also, I think, to consider that punishment as arbitrary, or depending on the will of the Supreme Legislator, like the punishments appended to certain crimes by human laws. I conceive the great God originally formed such an essential connection between sin and misery, that nothing but his own mercy can ever separate them. Thus, I suppose, that the poisonous nature of the forbidden fruit, first introduced the seeds of death into the human frame. So the drunkard and the debauchee, by their intemperance, entail misery and pain, both upon themselves and their posterity.

Now

* *Doddridge’s Lectures*, Vol. II. p. 473. 3d Ed.

† Luke xii. 47, 48.

Now admitting the natural immortality of the soul, the question is not, Whether it be just in God to make sinners for ever miserable? but rather, Whether his justice, or goodness, oblige him to dissolve this original connection between moral and natural evil, and to work a miracle for the salvation of sinners, after they have voluntarily plunged themselves into destruction?

You strengthen your remark on the future punishment of sin, by comparing the doctrine of philosophical necessity therewith; and it strikes you with horror ‘that men should be punished eternally for a conduct, which you consider as inevitable*.’ That God has a perfect foreknowledge of all events, and has even predetermined them in his own mind, is a doctrine strongly expressed in many parts of scripture; but it is also asserted with equal clearness, that sinners act voluntarily, and are by no means necessitated in any manner that affects the freedom of their actions, or lessens the magnitude of their crimes. St. Peter has a striking expression on this subject in his address to the Jews on the crucifixion of Christ—‘Him being delivered by the DETERMINATE COUNCIL and FOREKNOWLEDGE of God, ye have taken, and by WICKED hands have crucified and slain †.’

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* Reasons, p. 10.

† Acts ii. 23.

My object is not, however, either to prove or to explain these doctrines; but simply to shew that, admitting them both, they do not so clash as to form any just objection to the Christian system.

In the first place, the doctrine of necessity can no way affect the doctrine of future punishment, unless it be by destroying moral agency, and taking away the moral evil of transgression. If men continue free agents, and accountable for their conduct to their Maker, then are they still liable to punishment for disobedience; and supposing sin to have merited endless punishment, if sinners were under no necessity, they can merit it no less while the moral evil of their conduct continues to remain the same.

If indeed the doctrine of necessity reduces us to mere machines, incapable of moral agency, then it sets aside not only *eternal* punishments, but *all* punishments and rewards whatever, future or present; and it is as unjust and ridiculous to inflict punishment upon a thief, as upon a watch or a windmill.

Farther, if the doctrine of necessity set aside rewards and punishments, then does it also, in my apprehension, that of a future state, the most

essential character of which is, that it is a state of rewards and punishments. Consequently, this objection will destroy your hypothesis respecting a future state, as well as mine.

But so far is the doctrine of necessity from taking away the evil of vice, and the justice of punishment, that Dr. PRIESTLEY, and other able defenders of this scheme, deny the possibility of vice or virtue, reward or punishment, or any other*. Lord KAIMES says, very emphatically, that without it, ‘ Man would not be capable of
 ‘ either rewards or punishments, he would not be
 ‘ fitted either for divine or human government,
 ‘ he would be a creature that has no resemblance
 ‘ to the (present) human race †.’ Even Dr. PRICE, the great advocate of philosophical liberty, is quoted by his friend PRIESTLEY, as confessing the same thing. In answer to an objection drawn from the inconsistency of virtue and necessity, he remarks, ‘ by the necessity which is said
 ‘ to diminish the virtue of good actions, must be
 ‘ meant not a *natural*, but a *moral* necessity, or
 ‘ such as arises from the influence of motives,
 ‘ and affections of the mind; or that certainty of
 ‘ determining one way which may take place
 ‘ upon the supposition of certain views, circum-
 ‘ stances,

* See PRIESTLEY on Philosophical Necessity, Section vii.

† Sketches on Man, Vol. II. page 300.

stances, and principles of an agent. Now it is undeniable, that the very greatest necessity of this sort is consistent with, nay is implied in, the idea of the *most perfect and meritorious virtue*, and, consequently, can by no means be what, of itself, ever lessens it. The more confidently we may depend upon a being's doing an action, when convinced of its propriety, whatever obstacles may lie in his way, or morally speaking, the more efficacious and unconquerable the influence of conscience is within him, the more amiable we must think him.

In like manner the most abandoned and detestable state of wickedness implies the greatest *necessity of sinning*, and the greatest degree of moral impotence. He is the most vicious man who is so enslaved by vicious habits, or in whom appetite has so far gained the ascendant, and a regard to virtue and duty is so far weakened, that we can at any time, with certainty, foretell that he will do evil, when tempted to it*.

Now if *necessity* be that which chiefly aggravates the malignity of sin, and, essential to its very being, it is surely inconceivable that it should

* Quoted, Priestley on Necessity, page 60, 61.

should make punishment appear the more severe. To suppose this would be tantamount to supposing, that the punishment of sin ought to be less, because its criminality is greater.

How far it may be fit for the Divine Being thus exemplarily to punish sin, is not for us to judge: it would be presumptuous to attempt it. Nor is it safe to reason from our own feelings. Our compassion is a compound of love and weakness; and we often remit punishment either from a sense of our own infirmity, or from the pain it gives us to see judgment executed; but these things can have no place in God: his goodness is pure and unmixed, and his mercy perfectly spontaneous and disinterested.

We may, indeed, infer from the infinitude of the divine goodness, taken in connection with his power and wisdom, that our system of nature and providence is the best that could have been adopted: and that even the introduction of evil, both natural and moral, will be attended with advantage to the *system*; but it does not therefore follow that advantage will result to *every* individual.

If we consider God as the *parent* of his creatures, yet can we not therefore reason safely in
all

all cases from our own parental conduct and affections. There have been instances in which the best of fathers have been compelled to disown and abandon their offspring through their excessive perverseness and disobedience: and who dare affirm that our heavenly Parent may not in some instances do this, in perfect consistency with his divine perfections? Nay; who dare to say but that his divine perfections (his holiness and justice, more particularly) may in some cases even require this?

That ‘*all* punishment ought to be so applied, ‘that while it operates for an example it should reform the offender*,’ may be a *dogma* of modern philosophy, but is not, I think, agreeable to the common sense of mankind in general, who, in all ages and countries, with a very few exceptions, have thought that some crimes deserve capital punishment, and ought not to be atoned but by the life of the offender. And there are certainly instances in which mercy to individuals would be cruel to society at large.

These hints are offered with a view of *softening* some of the difficulties of the Christian scheme; not with the expectation of being able wholly to
account

* Reasons, page 10.

account for them, or fully justify the divine conduct. We have seen there are difficulties in natural as well as in revealed religion, which cannot be accounted for in the present state. Revelation, however, gives us this assurance, which nature cannot, that what we know not now, we shall know hereafter*. What I have said, may be, I hope, sufficient to shew that the scriptures do *not* assert ‘ that everlasting misery is ‘ the destination of the *great mass* of human ‘ beings;’ much less that the benevolent Deity ‘ created beings *in order* to make them miserable †.’

II. Your second objection to Revelation refers chiefly to the Old Testament, and is drawn from the enjoined ‘ *extermination of the Canaanites* ;’ as I have considered this at some length elsewhere ‡ I shall only recapitulate the topics of argument there employed. They are—The sovereignty of God, and that he has an undoubted right to resume the life he gave: that supposing men in innocence to have a claim on their

* John xiii. 7. See also 1 Cor. xiii. 9—12.

† Reasons, p. 30, 36.

‡ *Age of Infidelity*, Part II. p. 26—31. I beg pardon for the apparent vanity of repeated reference to my own tracts; but as conciseness is an object in a pamphlet, I flatter myself the reader will admit it to be a more venial fault, to refer to the arguments at length elsewhere than to repeat them.

their Maker for the continuance of life; yet we have all forfeited our lives by sin: that this was particularly the case of the Canaanites, whose national character was extremely criminal and vicious: that the divine patience, notwithstanding, bore with them from generation to generation, and at the last gave them the alternative of saving themselves either by flight, or the renunciation of their idolatries; and commanded their destruction *only* in cases of obstinate resistance, and perseverance in idolatry and vice. I have added, that these nations were consumed not merely by the sword, but in part also by the immediate hand of Providence, which often destroys cities and nations eminent for wickedness:—and, in some instances, the destruction has been far more extensive and terrible than what is here complained of.

The learned and worthy Bishop of LANDAFF has since employed some of the same topics, in answer to the same objection. You think his arguments inconclusive, and give your reasons. I have not the presumption to appear as his Lordship's advocate; but so far as your remarks affect also my reasoning, I may be allowed to notice them. The prelate has compared the destruction of the Canaanites to the destructions 'brought on mankind by the operations of the

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‘ laws of nature,’ as in earthquakes, &c. when infants as well as adults have been involved in one common calamity. I had hinted at the same argument. You object to the comparison, because the one case is represented as the immediate punishment of heaven, the other as a calamity produced in the ordinary course of nature. In the one case children are necessarily involved in the fate of their parents, in the other they might be easily discriminated.

With respect to the punishment of children, I would remark, that if death itself be a punishment, children are punished every day; if it be *not*, then the *kind* of death only constituted the punishment; and I cannot conceive the sword of war more dreadful than a burning fever, or a wasting plague, especially as infants could suffer nothing from apprehension.

I readily grant that the extermination of the Canaanites was a severe and terrible punishment to the parents; but if we admit the future happiness of all dying infants, it will hardly be pretended that the sparing of their lives, while their parents were destroyed, would have been a privilege or a blessing.

But if the justice of God required the death of these nations, why not destroy them by an earthquake, or pestilence, or some other general calamity, rather than endanger the moral character of the Israelites, by making them a nation of executioners? It might be sufficient to refer this question to the sovereignty of God: "He giveth not account of any of his matters*."—But if the attempt be not too presumptuous, I would hint several probable reasons, on the part of God, of the Canaanites, and of the Israelites.

1. On the part of the CANAANITES, I have already observed, and have elsewhere endeavoured to prove †, that the Israelites were ordered to make them the tender of life and mercy, if they would renounce their idolatry, and acknowledge the God of Israel; and this command was backed with the most satisfactory evidence of its divine authority, in the miracles wrought in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the Wilderness; the fame of which spread rapidly among the surrounding nations ‡. But the earthquake, the tempest, and the pestilence, give no such warning.

2. On the part of God this method gave honour to his divine perfections:—his *mercy* in
giving

* Job xxxiii. 13. † *Age of Infidelity*, Part ii. p. 28—30.

‡ Joshua ii. 9—11.

giving such an offer, and his *justice* in publishing the *cause* of his sentence; whereas, in general calamities, the just and unjust perish commonly together: and had they been destroyed by any such judgment, a sweeping pestilence, for instance, themselves might have supposed as well as you, that it was not a punishment, only a calamity.

3. On the part of the Israelites; they had hereby the fullest proof of that extraordinary Providence, under which they were placed, in the miraculous assistance afforded to their arms:

The Bishop of Landaff adds, that God, in making the Israelites ‘the executors of his vengeance—gave such an evident and terrible proof of his abomination of vice, as could not fail to strike the surrounding nations with astonishment and terror; and to impress on the minds of the Israelites what they were to expect, if they followed the example of the nations whom he commanded them to cut off.’ You admit the strength of the impression; but suppose that its tendency ‘would be very pernicious.’

‘By learning that it belonged to the character of the governor and judge of the world, to inflict *cruel* and *unjust punishment*, they would not
‘ be.

‘ be inspired with veneration’ for him; nor was it (you think) likely to teach them *humanity*, or justice *. This is well said on the supposition, that the excision of these nations was *unjust*; but if, as it appears to me from the above considerations, that punishment was *just* in itself; inflicted by the highest *authority*, and accompanied with overtures of *mercy*, then I hope you will admit it was calculated to inspire them with veneration for God, hatred to vice, and love to justice, if not humanity.

I cannot conclude this subject, as it respects the Canaanites, better than by reciting the following passage from a very ancient Jewish writing, traditionally, though I apprehend unjustly, ascribed to Solomon: and which confirms most of the ideas I have advanced. ‘ O Lord’ (says the pious Hebrew) ‘ it was thy will to destroy
 ‘ by the hands of our fathers both those old
 ‘ inhabitants of thy holy land, whom thou hatedst
 ‘ for doing *most odious works* of witchcrafts, and
 ‘ wicked sacrifices; and also those merciless
 ‘ murderers of children, and devourers of mans’
 ‘ flesh, and the feasts of blood; with their priests
 ‘ out of the midst of their idolatrous crew, and
 ‘ the parents, that killed with their own hands
 ‘ souls destitute of help: that the land, which
 ‘ thou

* Reasons, p. 18, 19.

‘ thou esteemedst above all other, might receive
 ‘ a worthy colony of God’s children.

‘ Nevertheless even those thou *sparedst* as men,
 ‘ and didst send wasps, forerunners of thine host,
 ‘ to destroy them *by little and little*. Not that
 ‘ thou wast unable to bring the ungodly under
 ‘ the hand of the righteous in battle, or to de-
 ‘ stroy them at once with cruel beasts, or with
 ‘ one rough word: But executing thy judgments
 ‘ upon them, by little and little, *thou gavest them*
 ‘ *place of repentance*, not being ignorant that they
 ‘ were a naughty generation, and that their
 ‘ malice was bred in them, and that their
 ‘ cogitation would never be changed. For it
 ‘ was a cursed seed from the beginning; neither
 ‘ didst thou for fear of any man give them pardon
 ‘ for those things wherein they sinned. For
 ‘ who shall say, What hast thou done? or who
 ‘ shall withstand thy judgment? or who shall
 ‘ accuse thee for the nations that perish, whom
 ‘ *thou hast made*? or who shall come to stand
 ‘ against thee, to be revenged for the *unrighteous*
 ‘ men?

‘ Forasmuch then, as thou art righteous thy-
 ‘ self, thou orderest all things righteously: think-
 ‘ ing it not agreeable with thy power to condemn
 ‘ him that hath not deserved to be punished.

‘ For

‘ For thy power is the beginning of righteousness; and because thou art the Lord of all, it maketh thee to be gracious unto all. . . .

‘ Thou mayest use power when thou wilt: But *by such works* hast thou taught thy people that *the just man should be MERCIFUL*, and hast made thy children to be of a good hope that thou givest repentance for sins. For if thou didst punish the enemies of thy children, and the condemned to death, with *such deliberation*, giving them *time* and *place* whereby they might be delivered from their malice: With how great circumspection didst thou judge thine own sons, unto whose fathers thou hast sworn and made covenants of good promises? Therefore, whereas thou dost chasten us, thou scourgest our enemies a thousand times more, to the intent that, when we judge, we should carefully *think of thy goodness*, and when we ourselves are judged we should *look for mercy* *!’

To proceed.—You think the case of the AMALÉKITES peculiarly hard; and hard indeed it was, if, as you suppose, their only crime was, that *they took up arms against their invaders:*’ but, with your leave, we will examine the circumstances of their history.

The

* Wisdom of Solomon, chap. xii.

The Amalekites were not inhabitants of Canaan, but resided on its borders. They were descendants of Esau and of the stock of Abraham, and so far related to the Israelites. But when they heard that the latter were coming to take possession of their long-promised country, though themselves were not originally among the devoted nations, they were the first to meet and to oppose them; and there were some circumstances (as we shall see immediately) which made their conduct peculiarly offensive to the God of Israel, who therefore gave his people a great and decisive victory over them, and afterward declared, that ‘he would utterly put out their remembrance from under heaven.’ Moses therefore builded an altar, by way of memorial, and called it ‘JEHOVAH-NISSI, the Lord is my banner: For he said, because the Lord hath sworn that he will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.’—So our translators, following the ancient Jewish commentators; but many others take the passage more literally, as in our marginal version. ‘Because the hand (to wit, of Amalek) is against the throne of the Lord, therefore the Lord will war with Amalek from generation to generation!’ If this be the true rendering, it implies that the Amalekites were acquainted with the divine decree in favour of Israel, and set themselves to oppose it:—they ‘lifted up their hand against

‘ against the throne of God *.’ However this may be, there is no doubt but they were apostates from the religion of their father Abraham, that they symbolized with the Canaanites in their abominations, and united with the Midianites and Moabites to oppress the Hebrews †.

Therefore, when several years afterward they were about to enter the promised land, this conduct was recollected, and some material circumstances were added in the recapitulation of their crimes. ‘ Remember what Amalek did unto thee ‘ by the way, when ye were come forth out of ‘ Egypt ; how he *met thee by the way and smote the* ‘ *hindmost* of thee, even *all that were feeble* behind ‘ thee, when *thou wast faint and weary*, and he ‘ feared not God ‡.’ So that it appears, Amalek not only acted in impious opposition to JEHOVAH, the God of Abraham ; but also took a cowardly advantage of the weak and feeble situation of Israel at the time. Many years after this, the same people, persevering, no doubt, in their idolatry and iniquities, the order was given for their immediate destruction, and it is then particularly mentioned,

* See Ainsworth in loc.—A later writer hath suggested the following translation: ‘ For he said, because my hand hath been ‘ upon the ensign of the Lord [the miraculous rod, ver. 9.] so ‘ Jehovah will have war with Amalek,’ &c.

† See Judges v. 13.

‡ Deut. xxv. 17, 18.

mentioned, that they ‘ laid wait for Israel by the way, when he came up from Egypt*.’ After reading these passages, I hope you will not again assert, that the only crime of the Amalekites was ‘ resisting their invaders,’ since they never were invaded by the Israelites; but, coming voluntarily and treacherously upon them, were the aggressors against them, as well as by their impiety enemies to God.

But you object, it was not the same generation of men who committed the offence that suffered the punishment: True, Sir, but it is a maxim, both with the God of Israel, and the God of Providence, ‘ to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children,’ when the children copy the iniquities of their parents †.

From the history of the Amalekites you pass immediately to the *imprecations* in the *psalms*, connecting them in this manner. ‘ We need not, surely (you say) be surpris’d that the Jewish people have been characteris’d by the qualities of cruelty and malice. Nevertheless we find these qualities appearing sometimes where we should not expect it:—we find them in their *devotions*.’

This

* 1 Sam. xv. 2.

† See Age of Infidel. Part I. p. 51.

This is not an age to be surpris'd at any thing, much less at a groundless accusation; and such, in great measure, I consider this against the Jews; since I know of no reason for believing them to be more cruel or malicious than were the most boasted nations of antiquity. Of this I am certain, that there were several things in their religion, and in the conduct of God toward them, intended to soften and civilize them, as well as to make them religious: I will slightly mention a few.

1. In the Jewish law there were several precepts inculcating, not only love to their brethren, but pity to strangers, compassion to enemies, and mercy to the brute creation, as may be seen in the texts below referred to*.

2. It appears to be one design of Providence in permitting their slavery in Egypt, to teach them sympathy and compassion †.

3. There are many instances in the sacred books of these virtues, particularly of mercy to enemies—as in the conduct of David toward Saul ‡.

4. It

* Exod. xxii. 21—27. xxiii. 4—9. Deut. xxii. 1—10. xxiv. 10—22. † Exod. xxiii. 9. ‡ 1 Sam. xxiv.

4. It must be admitted, however, there was a difference between Judaism and Christianity: the character of the latter is mercy and benevolence, of the former, equity and justice. We are taught to forgive, and pray for the salvation of our enemies: They went no farther, in general, than to pray for justice. Paul speaks the language of the old dispensation, when he says of Alexander the copper-smith, ‘the Lord reward him according to his works;’ but the language of the new, when he speaks just afterward of the desertion of his timid friends,—‘I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge*’; in both cases, I suppose, his mind and pen equally under a divine superintendency.

5. In the passages which seem most bitter, the Psalmist prays not for the eternal ruin of his enemies, but for their temporal destruction †; and as God was the King of Israel, and they were under a particular providence, as a theocracy, this was nothing more than an application to the supreme magistrate for justice.

6. In

* 1 Tim. iv. 14, 16.

† Pf. lv. 15. Indeed says, ‘Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell;’—but the margin, reads more properly ‘the grave,’—the allusion is to an earthquake.

6. In some cases, I observe, where the severest judgments are imprecated, it is with a view to their reform and conversion:—‘ Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O Lord *.’—In other instances I remark, that his prayer goes no farther than to the disappointment of their schemes:—‘ Arise, O Lord, disappoint him:’—‘ Let them be confounded and put to shame †.’

7. In most cases I believe it would be found, upon minute examination, that the Psalmist is not speaking of his private or personal enemies, but of those of the church and state; and that he does not speak as a simple individual, but as a prophet. And it is in this light that those psalms are cited in the New Testament ‡.

8. Accordingly, almost the whole of the imprecatory passages might more literally be rendered as predictions; for the Hebrews have the imperative mood in the second person only; consequently all passages which are in the third person, either singular or plural, are not, in the Hebrew, in the imperative, but in the future; and might all be so rendered, when the other sense appears exceptionable. Indeed the whole of the
psalms

* Pf. lxxxiii. 16. † Pf. xvii. 13. xxxv. 4.

‡ See Psalm lxix. cix. &c.

psalms most objected against, are rendered in the future, as prophecies instead of imprecations, by Bishop HORNE, and other of the best Hebrew critics.

III. Your last objection is formed from ‘the difficulty attending the very notion of miracles and revelation * ;’ that is, you mean to say, that these things are ‘antecedently improbable,’ though ‘not absolutely incredible †.’ I hardly need, Sir, to point out to a philosopher of your penetration, the weakness, and I will add, the inadmissibility of this method of reasoning. The scriptures alledge miracles and revelation as facts, attested by a variety of credible eye and ear witnesses: you admit they are ‘not absolutely incredible;’ nay, you confess that supposing the Christian Revelation to be *false*, ‘both the conduct of the apostles and the rapid success of christianity are unaccountable;’ all you object is, that these facts are ‘antecedently improbable!’ But ‘facts are stubborn things,’ Sir, and will not yield to probability, nor give way to theory, or hypothesis. A great number of existing facts, both in history and philosophy, were ‘antecedently improbable.’ If intelligent creatures existed before moral evil (as will not be denied) that must have been to them the greatest of all *antecedent improbabilities*; yea,

* Reasons for Scep. p. 24.

† Ibid. p. 28.

yea, I doubt not it must have appeared impossible. That a magnet should attract iron, that it should point always to the poles, and especially, that it should by attrition communicate that power to a needle, are facts ‘ antecedently improbable ;’ but that it should be possible for human art to form artificial magnets must have seemed antecedently impossible. The like may be said of a thousand phenomena of nature, and of ten thousand circumstances in providence: What then is the weight of your antecedent improbability?

But weak as this objection is, I am persuaded that it is also unfounded; and that neither miracles nor revelation are any otherwise antecedently improbable, than as they are extraordinary, which is implied in the term *miracles*.

The desirableness of Revelation is generally admitted, even by those who deny the fact. *Socrates*, the wisest of heathen sages, not only felt this, and thought the thing ‘ antecedently probable ;’ but persuaded himself that it would take place, and led his disciples to look and wait for so desirable an event*.

Mr. *Hume*, though an avowed enemy to Christianity, seems to admit some kind of Revelation

* Plato in Alcibiade 2.

lation highly desirable and antecedently probable. ‘ The most natural sentiment (he says) which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, or at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular Revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operation of the divine object of our faith. A person seasoned with a just sense of the *imperfection of natural reason* will fly to *revealed truth* with the greatest avidity. To be a philosophical *Sceptic* is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound and believing Christian*.’—I wish, Sir, you may be an instance in point to prove the truth and justness of the last remark!

But your objections seem levelled, not so much against the probability of *any* Revelation, as against *that* contained in the scriptures. You are particularly offended with that kind of colloquial discourse, which passed between the Deity and Abraham, Moses, &c.—It is, to be sure, very becoming such creatures as we are, to dictate to the Supreme Being, what kind of a Revelation we please to accept of! or what is the most suitable language for our Maker! But
passing

* Dialogues on Natural Religion, page 363.

passing this absurdity, I conceive there is nothing unworthy of Deity, but rather highly honourable to his character, in assuming a visible and created form, that his glory may not overpower us—or in speaking to us in our own language, as a parent to his children. ‘ Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity, whose name is Holy! I dwell in the high and holy place; with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones*.’ Surely this is an idea every way becoming the Infinite Deity, the Universal Parent; and to this may be reduced the whole of the Old Testament appearances, though, in the compass of a pamphlet, it is not possible to examine them separately and minutely.

If God were pleased to reveal himself, it is antecedently probable he would seal the discovery by some extraordinary events or circumstances, as marks and evidences of the divine power: these would be miraculous, and thence the antecedent credibility of miracles. Objections to the number, or particular circumstances of these events, are trifling and inconsiderable, and the whole controversy, respecting miracles, has been so fully and ably discussed on both sides, that

* Isaiah lvii. 15.

that scarcely any thing more can be expected on either: in me it would be folly to attempt it.

Having thus far examined, and, in some measure at least, as I would hope, obviated your objections to Christianity, permit me now to offer a few arguments in its favour. You will not expect, me on this occasion, to enter into the general evidences of Christianity, especially as you are acquainted with the recent and masterly writings of Bishop WATSON and Mr. PALEY. I shall confine myself therefore to a few hints of arguments, which might be derived from the same topics which have furnished your objections, and which may serve to shew that we have no reason to fear any discussions connected with this subject.

I. My first argument is derived from the *character* of CHRIST.—I conceive no impostor would have advanced a system of morals so strictly pure, and even severely holy, as are those of the New Testament. The thing is not probable in itself, nor have we any instance in fact to render it so. *Mahomet* certainly, in many things, consulted the taste and passions of his followers, and owed great part of his success to the corporeal indulgencies he gave them, particularly as to women. Other sectaries have indeed made great pretensions to sanctity;

sanctity; but it has been chiefly in external shew. If they have fasted, it has been that they might appear unto men to fast. If they have prayed, it has not been in the secret chamber. In short, their regard has been confined chiefly to externals; and their religion has not been the religion of the heart.

Neither would an impostor have passed so severe a censure on his own countrymen. He might have condemned the heathen, and nothing would have been more likely to ingratiate himself with the Jews: but, on the contrary, Jesus taught that it would be 'more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah, in the day of judgment,' than for his unbelieving countrymen.

It is probable, then, from these considerations (for I am now stating probabilities) that Jesus was *not an impostor*; because it is not probable that an impostor would have acted thus. But if Jesus was not an impostor, he must have been what he pretended to be, the *Messiah* sent by God; and, consequently, Christianity must be true.

Indeed the character of an impostor is in itself so detestable and criminal, that I find sceptical, and even deistical writers, very unwilling to

apply it to Jesus Christ. *Rousseau*, the excentrical *Rousseau*, prefers him infinitely to Socrates. Even *Thomas Paine*, in the first part of his *Age of Reason*, calls him a ‘virtuous and amiable reformer;’ and, in the second part, seems to think it more reasonable to question his existence than his virtue *.—You, Sir, have said several things honourable to Christ and Christianity. It is your ‘sincere opinion that a purer, a more dignified, or a more amiable religion was never exhibited to the sons of men, than we find in what is called the Lord’s Prayer, in the parable of the prodigal, and other parts of Christ’s discourses †.’ Now, Sir, if Jesus were wiser than Socrates, and his religion so very pure, dignified, and amiable, is it not possible that you, who do not claim a character of such distinguished wisdom and excellence, may be mistaken in your conceptions of the propriety and truth of other parts of his doctrine, rather than that so divine a teacher should grossly contradict himself in his fundamental principles? Is it not possible that even the scripture doctrine of future punishment may be more worthy of the Divine Being, than is consistent with your pre-conceived opinions, or (in another word) your prejudices?

It

* See *Age of Infidelity*, Part I. p. 22. Part II. p. 124.

† *Reasons for Scept.* p. 33. See also p. 35.

It seems to me, that this single consideration of the character of Christ might be sufficient to decide, as to the truth of Christianity. For if Jesus Christ were only a wise and good man, it seems impossible to suppose he could form the design of imposing a false religion upon mankind; and to say that he was not such, seems to shock the feelings even of the hardiest advocates of infidelity.

This also appears decisive as to the question of miracles. It is certain on all hands, by the confession of Jews and Heathens, as well as Christians, that Jesus pretended to miraculous powers, and actually did many wonderful things. Now, if Jesus Christ did work miracles, there is an end of the question; if he did not, he could not be a wise and good man, but a juggler and impostor; which is a supposition too shocking to common sense (as well as piety) to be openly maintained; and yet there is no medium. Admit, therefore, but the moral character of Christ, and so much of his extraordinary powers as was admitted by his Jewish and Pagan enemies—add, that he suffered and died in confirmation of his doctrines, and that his apostles did the same—and you have difficulties to account for in rejecting Christianity, much greater than what are to be

be found in it, because they are not difficulties of theory, but of *fact*.

II. The *History of the Jews*, from first to last, affords strong evidences of a divine interposition, and consequently in favour of revelation. Their rise, rapid increase in slavery, deliverance from Egypt, sojourning in the wilderness, conquest of Canaan, safety and prosperity in obedience, calamity and sufferings for disobedience, these are all topics fruitful of argument. To these may be added, that their origin, and all the changes of their fate and circumstances, were plainly marked out in ancient prophecy, as hath been excellently shewn by Bishop *Newton*. But the most decisive and wonderful circumstance in their history, is the destruction of their city, and consequent dispersion, with their distinct preservation to the present time, in exact harmony with the predictions of our Saviour. It was this induced Mr. *Addison* to consider every Jew as an evidence for Christianity, which indeed he is, of the most unexceptionable nature, his testimony being that of an enemy, and not delivered verbally but in *fact*.

III. I might reason from the *antecedent probability of a Divine Revelation*, considering its utility to us, in connection with the benevolence of the Deity.

I have

I have already touched upon this subject, in answering your third objection. The necessity and importance of a divine revelation hath been very ably argued by Dr. *Leland*, and other learned advocates of Christianity, whose writings I doubt not but you have consulted, and whose arguments must, I think, make some impression on a reader of your penetration and intelligence.—Supposing a divine revelation, many reasons might be given for its being communicated to individuals, rather than to mankind at large; and for those individuals not being, for the most part, princes, heroes, or philosophers, but men of plain understanding, of and simple modes of life, such as were the first preachers of christianity.

It might be shewn highly necessary and proper, that these communications should be evidenced to others by such extraordinary events as we call *miracles*, which are only deviations from the usual course of nature and providence. It is admitted that the universe is a great *machine*, and governed, in general, by laws as certain and invariable as the principles of mechanics: yet surely, he that made this wonderful machine is at liberty, if he think proper, to put his hand upon it, to suspend or invert its motions on particular occasions, and in so doing, without confusion, or injury to the work, he unquestionably demonstrates

demonstrates his power and wisdom even more than in the uniform regularity of its motions.

There is a striking and beautiful *analogy* between all the works and ways of God with which we are acquainted. The *analogy between natural and revealed religion* hath been very fully shewn, and ably reasoned from, by the late Bishop *Butler*, whose excellent work on that subject has not, I dare say, escaped your reading and attention. This analogy is much in favour of revelation; because it shews that God has constructed the natural and moral world on similar plans, and governs them by nearly the same laws. Infomuch, that most of the objections to revelation will apply with equal force (as I have endeavoured to shew Mr. *Paine* *), against the religion of nature, and the being and attributes of God.

Christianity, however, goes much farther than the religion of nature, and may be *considered* as a *sequel* to it. Some truths, common to both, appear more clearly and with superior evidence in revelation; and others are thereby discovered which were before unknown. The doctrine of redemption is in itself (however ridiculed,) of more value than all the discoveries of nature, and more honourable to the divine perfections.

Revelation

* Age of Infidelity, Part II. p. 100—107.

Revelation gives light to several questions of the first importance, on which nature is invariably silent; and where both speak on the same subject, the language of Scripture is so much clearer, and more satisfactory, as to admit of no comparison: this is particularly the case on the subjects of the origin of evil, the divine placability, the method of reconciliation to God, and the nature of our future existence. As revelation excels in evidence, so does it, consequently, in the peace and comfort it affords under the various trials of human life, and especially in the hour of death*.

One other circumstance worthy of remark to you, as a friend of literature and philosophy, is, that Revelation perfectly harmonizes with every recent discovery in the sublime sciences, and in the history of ancient nations; and acquires strength from every real accession to the knowledge of mankind. This might be particularly instanced in the modern theory of astronomy, electricity, and the late researches into Asiatic literature: and, paradoxical as it may seem, I am not afraid to assert, there are more occasional hints of modern discoveries and improvements in the Bible, than in the works of the immortal *Bacon*.

IV. Another

* See *Age of Infidelity*, Part II. p. 116—121.

IV. Another argument may be drawn from the tendency of *partial* to *universal* scepticism: I mean that the same principles which lead us to doubt and deny the truth of revealed religion, would lead us farther to question the truth of *all* religion. This is not mere hypothesis, but has been realized in many unhappy instances of persons who have degenerated from true christianity to false, from thence to Deism, to Atheism, and even universal Scepticism.

It is easy to trace this tendency through all the arguments for infidelity. I will give a few instances. I have just observed above, that many of the objections to Revelation apply also in a greater or less degree to natural religion: and consequently the same mode of reasoning, pursued a little farther, would carry us to Atheism. The same method by which Deists get rid of the evidences of Revelation, Atheists employ to get rid of Theism. And the same libertine conduct and principles, which lead men to wish, and hope, and conclude, that the Bible is a fable, will lead them also to wish, and hope, and conclude the same, as to the doctrines of a Deity and a future state.

Scepticism has a no less evil tendency in *civil* matters. The undervaluing credible testimony
in

in favour of Revelation, leads to universal distrust among mankind. If we are to believe nothing but what we see with our own eyes, or hear with our own ears, adieu to all history, especially that of early times. For if twelve men are not to be believed in facts they uniformly attest, as having seen and heard, and after having sealed their testimony with their blood, where shall we find evidence to be depended on as 'the materials of authentic history?'

But I suppose the most general temptation to infidelity, among men of a literary and speculative turn, is the ambition of accounting for every thing on natural and philosophic principles.

‘ In pride, in reasoning pride, our error lies,
 ‘ All quit their sphere and rush into the skies.
 ‘ Pride still is aiming at the blest abodes,
 ‘ Men would be angels, angels would be gods:
 ‘ Aspiring to be gods, if angels fell,
 ‘ Aspiring to be angels, men rebel.’

POPE.

The great teacher of Christianity lays it down for a first principle in his religion, that we must ‘ be converted, and become as little children *,’ ere we can be admitted as his genuine disciples.

To

* Matt. xviii. 3. xix. 14. &c.

To be converted is to be regenerated*. This new birth is the beginning of a new life, communicated by the grace of God, and which places us as infants in the hand of our heavenly parent; who instructs us, in many respects, as the wisest and best of us do our young children; and requires of us that same kind of disposition which we expect from them. Now if we expect our children to receive instruction (as we often necessarily do) with implicit credit, and very properly assure them that many things are true and right, the propriety or fitness of which they are by no means capable of comprehending, why should not our heavenly Father demand the same from us? If this is but 'the infancy of being,' surely the simplicity of children better becomes us than either dogmatism or incredulity.

Your letter concludes with hoping, that your christian friends will still permit you to indulge the prospect of a future and more perfect state. Your 'christian friends' would certainly wish you to enjoy all the comfort and felicity of such views; but at the same time, Sir, they must be concerned to see you looking westward for the rising sun. It is by the Gospel that 'life and immortality are brought to light;' thither therefore may your views be again directed! May the Sun of righteousness

* John iii. 1—8.

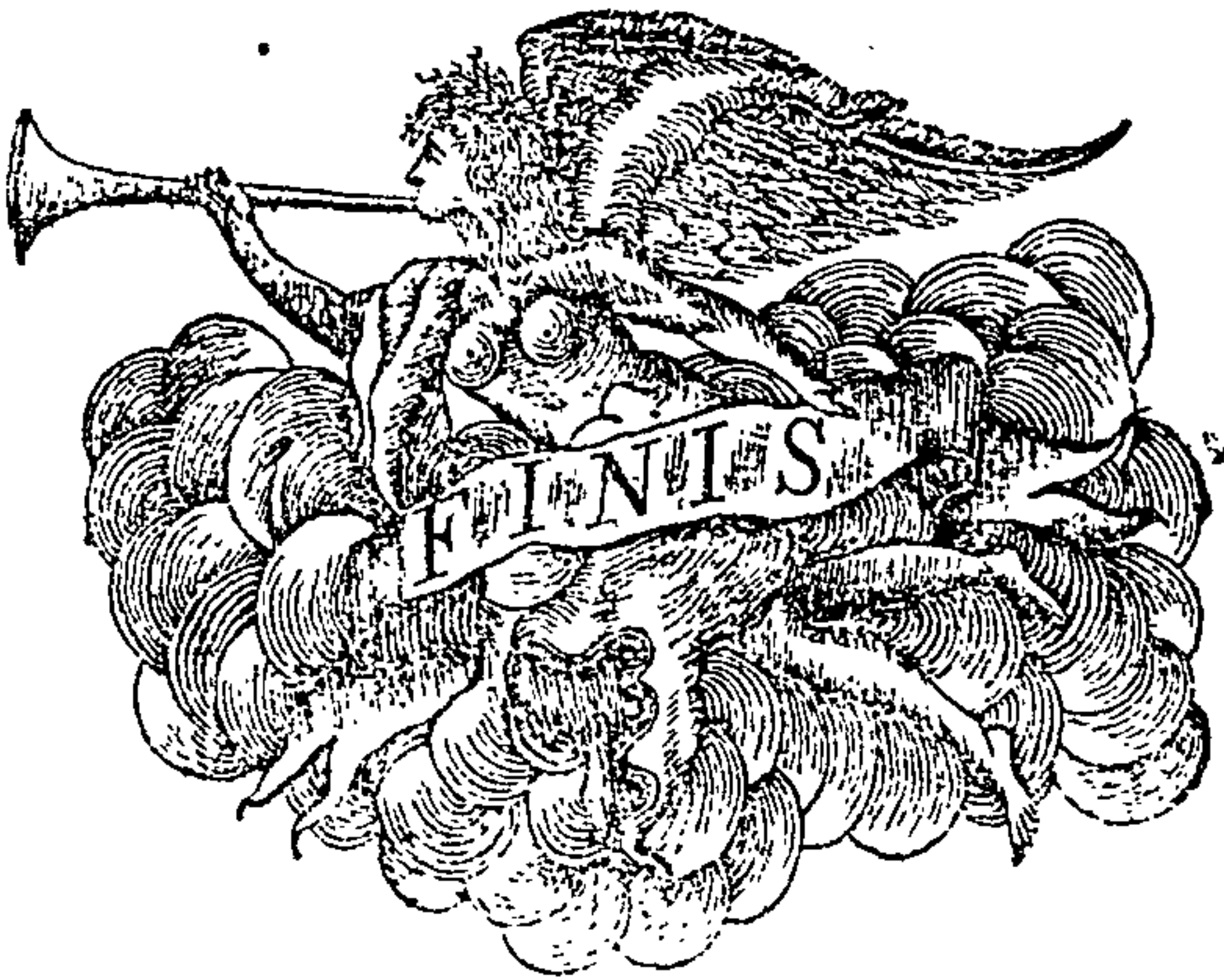
ousness dispel the gloomy apprehensions that disturb your present peace—may all your remaining days be gilded by his beams—and may this glory and happiness give place only to that which is eternal!

Such, Sir, are the prayers and wishes with which I have the honour most cordially to subscribe myself,

Your friend and servant

in the cause of truth,

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