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OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

HISTORY OF JESUS CHRIST,

Serving to Illustrate

The PROPRIETY of his CONDUCT,

AND

The BEAUTY of his CHARACTER.

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In Two VOLUMES.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N.

THE credibility of the history of Jesus Christ is the foundation of all our inquiries on the subject of his religion. It has employed the pens of many able writers, both in ancient and in modern times. By clearing off the rubbish, and laying open the basis of the structure, they have done very important service; and merit, from every friend of truth, the most grateful acknowledgements.

BUT to stop here, is not doing entire justice to the subject. There are unquestionably more elevated lights in which the religion of Jesus may be held out to the observation of the world. To say that the structure is solid, is not enough: Viewed with attention it must appear al-

so to be beautiful and sublime. Even after the most exact survey, we shall be obliged to confess that there are beauties which remain *still* to be unfolded, and sublimities which it is almost impossible to reach.

It is not to be doubted that the number of professed unbelievers, in any age, is greatly exceeded by a more numerous tribe, who, though not enemies, yet cannot be decently ranged among the friends of Christianity; who dislike it from caprice, or undervalue it from an insensibility to its charms. There are some who must be roused out of their criminal indifference, and others who must be armed against the darts of ridicule. They must be satisfied, not only that the religion of Jesus is true, but also that it is graceful, noble, and becoming.

How then shall we deal with such persons? To what expedient shall we have recourse for enlightening their minds and encouraging their approaches? Beyond all doubt we must direct them to the history of the author of this religion. We must exhibit, in their most striking lights, the memorable events of his life: We must attempt to show, from the conduct and character of this divine person, that he is an interesting object.

PERHAPS it may be alledged, that this task is unnecessary: Every person has the history in his hands, and simplicity is one of its characteristics. But this is the very reason why some affect to despise it: They attend to it with indifference, as to a beaten story; the beauties which every page presents are not observed at all; or, if observed, through the power of preju-

dice or of caprice, they excite no admiration.

THE following attempt is conducted on the supposition, that the history of the evangelists is perspicuous. For this reason, the meaning of words, or of difficult passages, is not properly made a subject of inquiry. In cases of competition, that meaning is always preferred which was most obvious, or rather which was suggested by the leading idea of the work; namely, the illustrating those circumstances which adorn both the public and private scenes of the life of Jesus.

AMONG readers who are raised above the vulgar, the refined pleasures of taste, and the capacity of admiring properly, are at present in high reputation. For gratifying and exercising these powers, the

transactions of the gospel-history are excellently adapted. Viewed in this light, they will be found possessed of a merit which secures them against being overpowered by the attacks of sophistry or of ridicule.

It must be allowed, that the enemies of Christianity attack it with some advantages on their side, from the light temper of the age, and from possessing those qualities which are suited to its temper. In their writings they display ingenuity, vivacity, gaiety; they are sparing of grave argument, or rather seem to despise it. They have invented a mode of investigation extremely alluring to the indolent and unexperienced: They assert boldly, conclude rashly, and put on an affected negligence, when they talk of religion.

SUCH is Voltaire. And this is no more than we expect of one, who, in the capacity of historian, cannot describe a battle, or even the face of a country, without displaying his darling passion, the love of novelty and paradox.

It is not easy to characterize the sentiments of the eloquent but visionary Rousseau: He is almost persuaded to be a Christian. But his ambition of being an *esprit fort*, which constitutionally he is not, checks his progress; while his sensibility and caprice betray him into greater inconsistencies, than any with which he has attempted to load the religion of Jesus.

ONE cannot enough regret, that our celebrated countryman, the rival of these foreigners in fame, should have taken the side of opposing christianity. In viewing

this subject, he has been betrayed by his own acuteness; his metaphysical system, fallacious, though profound, having like a whirlpool absorbed the native sentiments of his mind on religion and morality.

THE writer of the following observations cannot propose to examine all the arguments and insinuations of these adversaries of christianity: He only ventures to point out what he judges to be the fittest weapon of defence against their attacks, or rather to direct how it may be used and applied. His profession in life justifies the attempt, how defective soever the execution may be? He engaged in it at first from liking, and was impelled to go on by a conviction of its importance. One end is gained, if the young and inexperienced of the present age are guarded against some of the most dange-

rous snares of infidelity. It would gratify his highest wishes to be successful in persuading them that christianity, which he firmly believes to be divine, is a religion defensible on the principles both of reason and taste, and about whose honour no person who pretends to either of these ought to be indifferent.

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

HISTORY of JESUS CHRIST.

CHAP. I.

Of the Birth and Infancy of JESUS.

THE particulars relating to the birth and infancy of Jesus Christ, do not properly fall within the compass of the following observations, which treat professedly of his conduct and character. But as they are so closely connected with the subject, and as they make a part of his history, it would be very improper to omit them. They are related by two Evangelists: They are highly important and interesting; and by an attention to them, we are put in the proper situation for observing the other great events by which this history is distinguished.

S E C T. I.

Of the Mysteriousness of his Births.

T H E R E are some objects and events, which, by their nature, are too grand for description: In attempting to describe them, we betray our ignorance and incapacity; we either fall short of the truth, or are in danger of disguising its native majesty. If, for instance, one should pretend to give a satisfying account, how the rays of the sun are emitted from its body, without diminishing it, the ignorant perhaps might wonder, but wise men would think meanly of the attempt.

I F there are mysteries in the natural world, it is not unreasonable to admit, that in the intellectual world there are objects too wide for our grasp, which appear the wider and greater, the nearer we approach them. Such are the being of God, his perfections, his providence, and such is the great mystery which stands in the front of the gospel, “ God manifested in

“the flesh.” In all these objects there is something so grand that ideas fail us, when we pretend to trace them with more than ordinary care. By a modest inspection, we know all that can be known. Doubts and anxieties never fail to be the recompence of an over curious search.

THE mysterious birth of Jesus calls for our attention, as a memorable incident in his history, not on purpose to explain or account for it, but rather to show the propriety with which it is introduced, and is made a part of the history. The world, at least the Jews, had been prepared for this mysterious event, by clear predictions given a long time before the accomplishment; and the age in which Jesus appeared had the additional advantage of being prepared by the memorable circumstances of the birth of his harbinger, John the Baptist.

WITH one or both of these two preparatory events, the birth of Jesus Christ is always connected in the history. It is treated of professedly by two of the historians, Matthew and Luke, and by each in

such a way as we would naturally expect from men of their peculiar prepossessions and characters. Matthew, who was a Jew, confines himself to the first. Luke who was no Jew, and who wrote for universal instruction, enlarges on the latter. It was enough for the Jewish historian, if he could persuade his countrymen, that, in the mysterious birth of Jesus, one of their most memorable predictions of the Messiah had its accomplishment. With this he is satisfied himself, and rests upon it as sufficient for the information of his reader. “All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted, is God with us*.”

JOHN the Baptist appeared in the world to prepare the way of his master, and make straight his paths. He did so by his public ministry, and not less by the extraordinary circumstances of his birth. This

* Matth, i. 22. 23. Vid Isaiah, xvii. 14.

was a topic more likely to attract the notice of a gentile historian. Zacharias and Elisabeth were the parents of John, and Luke thus describes them : ‘ They had no child, “ because that Elisabeth was barren, and “ they both were now well stricken in “ years *.” This event, the almost miraculous birth of the baptist, was so happily fitted to prepare the way for the other, by which alone it could be exceeded, that the historian with much propriety seizes on it, and enlarges on all the circumstances that could contribute to make it either interesting or extraordinary. The piety of the parents, the uncomfortable situation of their old age, the appearance of the angel to Zacharias, his distrust, his dumbness till the birth of John, his miraculous restoration to the use of speech, the interview betwixt Elizabeth and Mary, the coincidence of the two miraculous events in point of time, together with the precedence of the lesser event, are circumstances which form a most happy connection, and appear with the utmost

* Luke i. 7.

propriety in the first chapter of the book, preparatory to the greater event described in the second.

If, among other purposes, miracles serve to rouse attention, or inspire veneration, then very properly the life of Jesus sets out with a miracle; and the miraculous circumstances of his birth are excellently adapted to both these purposes. There can be no difficulty in admitting, that the divine nature has mysteries in it: And that men have been much disposed to embrace this sentiment, is evident from the least acquaintance with the theology of the ancients, though their notions on the subject of a divine theogony are indeed loaded with absurdity. The incarnation and mysterious birth of the Son of God ought to be contemplated with religious veneration, rather than made the subject of subtle discussion and research. It is a task more suited to our present sphere, to trace the plainer passages of the life of Jesus, whom, in the highest sense, we may stile divine.

S E C T. II.

Of the humble Circumstances of his Birth.

ONE should naturally presume, that if so great a person were to appear in the world, it must be in a perfect suitability to the dignity of his character. This sentiment is so natural, that the Jews might be almost excused on account of their offence at the humble appearance of Jesus, if they had not been told of it before-hand by their prophets. The imagination delights in connecting, and we are accustomed to connect, every idea of external grandeur with dignity of character. But, whatever may be the source of this prejudice, reason, and sometimes experience, are found to be against it. Birth, rank, and precedence, are dazzling appendages; yet, without them, some illustrious personages have made their first appearances on the stage of the world. The humble circumstances of the birth of Jesus are produced by the historian

with an unparalleled simplicity. In attending to them, we feel something that we cannot well express. We feel a certain abasement of soul, and delicate attachment to the object. We sink into a sense of our own meanness, and are filled with admiration. We level in our minds all external pre-eminences. We think honourably of the lowest condition of humanity. We anticipate the latent merit which it may possess, and the real dignity with which it may be supported. Sentiments, such as these, crowd into the mind, from attending to the simple narration of this event, as related by the historian. Joseph and Mary were then at Bethlehem; “and so it was, while they
 “were there, the days were accomplished
 “that she should be delivered. And she
 “brought forth her first born son, and
 “wrapt him in swaddling cloaths, and laid
 “him in a manger, because there was no
 “room for them in the inn *.”

IN whatever way some readers are affected with this passage of the history of

* Luke ii. 6. 7.

Jefus, we affirm, that it has in it a great deal of beauty and propriety.

It is to be observed, that the humble circumstances of the birth of Jefus were admirably fitted to heighten the lustre of his public life and character; at least to impart every advantage which novelty or surprize can bestow. Some of the illustrious personages whom we meet with in life or in history, derive a considerable share of the splendour with which they have acted their part in public from this very circumstance. Like the sun they shine with the greater lustre, having émerged from the cloud, and attract more irresistibly the attention of mankind. Thus, when Jefus began to teach and to work miracles in that region of Judea where the circumstances of his birth were best known, nothing could exceed the astonishment of those who heard and saw him : “ Whence
 “ hath the man this wisdom, and these
 “ mighty works? Is not this the carpen-
 “ ter’s son? Is not his mother called Ma-
 “ ry, and his brethren James and Joses, and
 “ Simon and Judas? And his sisters, are
 “ they not all with us? Whence then hath

“this man these things *?” We are indeed told, that they were offended in him. But it is also true, that the offence sprang from envy; a circumstance which, instead of diminishing, rather serves to heighten the lustre of his character.

THE humble appearance of Jesus at his birth has also much propriety, as it fairly intimated to the world the nature of his kingdom. In the character of a king he was expected by the Jews; but they had formed to themselves notions of their king, and of his kingdom, highly prejudicial to the honour and interest of both. These delusive notions took rise among that people, partly from misunderstanding or misapplying some ancient prophecies respecting the Messiah, partly from their political situation as a conquered people. This situation their minds, swelled with ideas of independency, could but ill brook; and they were only waiting for a favourable juncture to redress it. Their prophets had told them of a Messiah, and had even described the whole compass of

* Matth. xiii. 54.

his character. But they viewed the object through a false medium, and, as it were, tinged by their own circumstances.

To a haughty and depressed people, nothing could be more desirable than the prospect of a conqueror rising up among them. Such a person they conceived the Messiah to be, and to this creature of their wishes applied the triumphant part of his character. Some early demonstration that their hopes were delusive was therefore highly proper; and no demonstration could be more satisfying than the humble manner in which the Messiah made his entry into the world.

It may be also observed, that by the humble circumstances of the birth of Jesus, the disposition of the world for receiving himself and his doctrine was put to the trial. Had he been born of parents who ennobled his birth by their blood, or by their figure in life, all without exception would have been forward to pay their homage. They had for a long time awaited, and now with an impatient ar-

dour were waiting his appearance. The mean form in which he at length appeared, was the test which distinguished the candid lovers of truth from the worldly-minded. Is this, might they not say, the Messiah in whom all our wishes have so long centered? Is this the son that is born, and the child that is given unto us, whose character is described in terms so magnificent and lofty? Can such majesty and meanness be compatible? Such must have been the reflections of many. The unthinking croud would allow themselves no room so much as to hesitate on the subject. But to those distinguished few who waited with proper dispositions for the salvation of Israel, this whole scene afforded an opportunity of discovering the strength of their faith, their love of virtue for its own sake, though stript of all external advantages, their elevation above this world, and firm belief in another. Of this number was Simeon, who saw, through the disguise of the lowly infant, the dignity of his character, and the important ends of his appearance in the world.

S E C T. III.

Of the early Homage paid him.

IN going over the memorable passages of the history of Jesus, every attentive reader must feel a gratification from observing, that though always uniform and consistent, it stands distinguished by a most beautiful variety. It is full of events and of objects; and though the same objects often recur, yet they are so much and so finely diversified, the lights in which they appear are at once so striking and so various, that the most enlivened attention is every moment called forth into exercise.

THE humble circumstances of the birth of Jesus made the subject of the former section: Here the scene changes and presents the same object in the light of majesty and grandeur; at least, in such a light as to give the early presages of it. Mankind almost invariably judge by the outward guise. It was, therefore highly proper that appearances should be balanced in the beginning, on purpose that

the world might not be misled in forming their judgment, or, if misled, might be the less excusable. The early homage done to Jesus is the more remarkable, that he received it from a variety of quarters while but an obscure infant. We see him worshipped by angels, sages, and saints almost at the same instant. Betwixt Jews and Heathen philosophers, we cannot suppose any concert or collusion. Each of these give their testimony to Jesus, and display in the eye of the world the dignity of his character.

ANGELS were held by the Jews to be of an order superior to men, by the degrees both of their knowledge and power: They were regarded also as the messengers of God to mankind on extraordinary occasions. Their messages for this reason were always received as the oracles of the Almighty. This method of communication between heaven and earth had now been a long time interrupted. On the present occasion it was all at once renewed. We may therefore easily conclude with what reverence the following message would be received: "Unto you

“ is born this day, in the city of David, a
 “ Saviour which is Christ the Lord *.”
 This was the message of the angel to the
 shepherds, to which immediately succeeded
 that joyful and benevolent acclama-
 tion: “ Glory to God in the highest, on
 “ earth peace, and goodwill toward men †.”
 The historian then proceeds to in-
 form us, that, “ when the shepherds had
 “ seen every thing was really so, as it had
 “ been told them, they made known abroad
 “ the saying ‡ which was concerning this
 “ child.” Here then appears one recei-
 ving the homage of angels, and having
 angels as heralds publishing his arrival.
 Was it not reasonable, was it not natural
 to conclude, if men were capable of
 forming a conclusion, that this was the
 person of whom the scripture had fore-
 told, that at his coming into the world
 the command should be given, “ Let all
 “ the angels of God worship him?”

NEXT to angels, prophets were held in
 great esteem among the Jews, and their
 words were also regarded as divine o-
 racles. By this time the order was al-

* Luke ii. 8, 11. † Luke ii. 14. ‡ Luke ii. 17.

most totally extinguished: No prophet had been sent to that people for several hundred years; yet Providence so directed it, that one person of this character, or of a character nearly resembling it, should be found in the world when Jesus appeared; I mean Simeon, who publicly saluted him in the temple, “and who had it revealed to him, that he should not see death, till he had seen the Lord’s Christ*.” If there be any doubt as to his public character; yet his private and personal character is truly venerable, such as gives his testimony the highest claim to our regard. “A just and devout man, waiting for the consolation of Israel†.” The circumstances of his great age and approaching dissolution serve to heighten the reverence due to his testimony. With the child Jesus in his arms, he takes leave of this world, and looks forward to another, while with transport he holds him out to all around, as a blessing to mankind: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word; for mine eyes

* Luke ii. 26.

† Luke ii. 25.

“ have seen thy falvation, which thou
 “ haft prepared before the face of all peo-
 “ ple, a light to lighten the gentiles, and
 “ the glory of thy people Israel *.”

As the religion of Jefus was to extend beyond the limits of Judea, it is eafy to fee, that, beyond its limits, thefe testimonies given to his dignity would have but an inconfiderable influence. By fome they might have been afcribed to artifice, by others to enthufiafm. Providence fo directed it, that, from diftant countries, and by the wife of the gentile world, an honourable testimony fhould be given. Accordingly it happened, “ When Jefus
 “ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the
 “ days of Herod the King, behold there
 “ came wife men from the eaft to Jeru-
 “ falem, faying, Where is he that is born
 “ king of the Jews, for we have feen his
 “ ftar in the eaft, and are come to worfhip
 “ him †?” It is not material to the purpofe of their testimony, to determine precisely who they were. Suppofe them either to

* Luke ii. 29.

† Matth. ii. 1. 2.

be kings, or such philosophers in the eastern world as at that time flourished in the west; suppose them to be the successors of Balaam, and acquainted by tradition with the prophecy of a star arising out of Israel; or, suppose them to be astronomers, who observed the motions of the heavenly bodies; their homage and worship of Jesus must appear in the most honourable light. Here were Gentiles, equally despising and despised by the Jews, doing honours to one sprung from that people with an ardour which was to be expected only from national attachments, sacrificing not only their prejudices but their reputation in doing homage to an obscure infant. From attending to the manners of the country whence they came, we must suppose them to be strongly prepossessed in favour of outward splendour. Yet, with what they saw, it appears they were not disconcerted. Their surprize must have been great on arriving in Judea, to find that Herod and the rulers were ignorant of this event. Nor could their astonishment be less, when, guided by the star to the house of Joseph,

they found the child with Mary his mother solitary and unattended. But his dignity they beheld shining through the veil of an humble disguise, and, convinced that he was the person in search of whom they had undertaken this journey, they fell down and worshipped him, and, according to the eastern manner of approaching princes, they offered to him gifts of very considerable value *.

THE honours done to Jesus in this early period of his life have a most beautiful aspect, in whatever light we view them. One purpose they evidently serve, that of rendering the notices of his arrival in the world more full and circumstantial. There is no absurdity in supposing that the appearance of Jesus was expected at that very time, and yet that the world was almost asleep when he made his appearance. In similar cases, and in the ordinary affairs of life, men are sometimes seized with unaccountable lethargies. Besides, neither Jesus nor his kingdom came with observation. Few were ripe for seeing at first

* Matth. ii 11,

more than some outlines of the plan: What they saw, they communicated to others. Though the discoveries which they made were all clothed with circumstances excellently suited to awaken and to fix attention, yet men are often unreasonable; and therefore perhaps it might have been objected, If such a person was really to appear in the world, why was not the information more express and particular? If his birth was so joyful an event, why was it so secret and obscure, that they were cut out in effect from sharing in the joy? But the objection disappears as soon as we reflect, that, by the honourable testimonies given to Jesus at this period from different quarters, and in a manner so public, all had opportunity of being informed concerning him, and, if they were disposed for it, of paying him also their homage: “This light shone in
“darkness, and the darkness comprehended
“it not. He came to his own, and his
“own received him not *.”

BUT the capital view in which the transactions, the subject of the present

section, must strike us, is the lustre which they give to the character of Jesus in his humble disguise, and their serving as prefaces of that mild dignity, which was soon to distinguish his public ministrations. We have seen in what sublime views he was held out to the world in this early period, and by whom. It is well known how much the credibility of testimony relating to any subject, and especially to the character of others, depends on the character of the person who gives it. A wise man doth not chuse to make his estimate of merit from the opinion of the multitude, or of persons whose merit and character is disputable; but from the opinion of the better and wiser few, whose characters are established for wisdom and goodness. In this light, the early testimonies given to the dignity of Jesus and the homage paid him appear to very great advantage.

* John i. 5. 11.

S E C T. IV.

Of the Enmity of Herod.

ONE uncontroverted test by which we judge of the importance of any event is, when causes to appearance contradictory concur in rendering it illustrious. By the same test, we form our judgment concerning the dignity of persons or characters. In the former section we have seen Jesus honoured and worshipped at his birth. Here we behold him the object of jealousy and hatred. He was born in the dominions of Herod. This Prince first is jealous of him, then endeavours to destroy him; all his attempts are unsuccessful; but they serve as a testimony to the dignity of Jesus, and no doubt at first contributed to spread his fame more speedily and effectually through the world. The arrival of the wise men, their declared errand, and their honourable mention of Jesus, were doubtless the occasions of Herod taking the alarm. The birth of Jesus had been published by the shepherds.

By Simeon in the temple he had been described in characters equally respectable and interesting. It is probable, however, all this had been unobserved by Herod, or had been regarded by him only as a subject of amusement for the vulgar. But, when he heard of persons from distant parts, inquiring about a prince, supposed to be born in his dominions, and declaring that they came on purpose to do him homage, “Then was Herod troubled and all Jerusalem with him*.”

It is not easy to be accounted for, how this information should have been disagreeable to the people of the Jews, unless we suppose them by this time so much broken with misfortunes, that they despaired of retrieving their affairs, and were unwilling to run any risque; or perhaps concluded that such a king of the Jews, an infant born in obscurity, was not the person suited to their exigencies. But that Herod should have been alarmed, was extremely natural. From other channels of information, we learn, that

* Matth. ii, 3.

He was of a jealous temper. Besides this, his seat on the throne was tottering, being an Idumean by birth, as Josephus informs us, and acting only as the viceroy of the Roman emperor.

EVERY step which Herod took after the first alarm convinces us more and more how honourably he thought of Jesus. This is plainly the language of the inquiry which he made by means of the Jewish priests about the place where the Christ should be born *.

HAD he thought contemptibly of the first information, it is not to be presumed that he would have given himself the trouble of making further inquiry. But his jealousy and disquiet pushed him on, and he had the mortification to find that they were too well founded: For, of the place where the Christ was to be born, Bethlehem of Judah, the prophets had foretold: "Out of thee shall come a governor or that shall rule my people Israel †."

IF the jealousy of Herod was great at first, it is easy to see how much it must

* Matth. ii, 4.

† Matth. ii, 3.

have been augmented by this new discovery. Accordingly it appears, that from this instant he formed the design of taking away the life of Jesus by a cruel treachery. He views him as a rival, and as such he endeavours to get him instantly into his power. For this purpose he inquires diligently concerning the time when the star made its first appearance, in order to find out the precise date of the birth; and to put the point of securing Jesus beyond all possibility of a failure, he proposes to go to Bethlehem and worship him. Even the disappointment of his scheme, by the departure of the wise men to their own country, gives occasion of discovering more fully what he thought of this supposed rival. The massacre of the infants in Bethlehem immediately followed. This general massacre is not wholly to be ascribed to the outrage of disappointed policy. It plainly appears, that Herod meant to involve this extraordinary infant in the common slaughter, and at the same time to strengthen himself against a suspicion, irritating to the Jews, of killing one who had been worshipped as

their sovereign. The sentiments which he had of Jesus may be absurd, or they may be short of the truth. However, they deserve regard, as containing the testimony of an enemy.

THE enmity of Herod against Jesus must have served also as the occasion of making the world earlier and more universally acquainted with him. This is the aspect of the whole proceedings of Herod from first to last, of the consultations which he held with the priests and rulers, and of the bloody edict which concluded the scene. His policy was so very thin, that some persons would easily see through the whole design; and so cruel, that it must have left the deepest prints on the minds of those who were nearly concerned in it. The memory of the event was in effect written with the blood of the children slain, and with the tears of the mothers, with whom Rachel is boldly yet beautifully introduced, mingling her lamentations *, having been distinguished in her life for maternal

* Matth. ii. 18.

affection, and her grave being on the spot where these cruelties were transacted.

ANOTHER light in which we may view the proceedings of Herod, is that of forming or of increasing an attachment to the innocent object of his enmity. Nothing more highly endears any person to whom we are not disaffected, than to see him exposed to some great danger, or to reflect on the dangers which he has narrowly escaped. His distresses, by a kind of attractive virtue, draw out our affections, and raise them to a degree which, in his undisturbed prosperity, we would never have experienced. The innocence, the dignity, or helplessness of the object, compleat our attachment. When we read the history of Joash the infant king of Judah, when we see his danger from the cruelty of Athaliah *, how do we interest ourselves in his safety, and with almost tears of joy congratulate him on his preservation? From the artifices of Herod, the child Je-

* 2 Kings, xi, 1. 2. 3.

Jesus was now in the like or in greater danger. His enemy, crossed in one scheme, has recourse to another apparently more formidable. We first tremble to think of the consequences of his intended visit at Bethlehem, and are held in anxious suspense till we know the issue of the decree which followed. Even when Jesus escapes by flight, our fears and anxieties follow him through his dangerous journey into Egypt, from whose ancient enmity to his nation, and recent prejudices, we still apprehend that fresh dangers await him.

Nothing can contribute more effectually to give any person a respectable figure, than the visible interposition of heaven in his behalf. The enmity of Herod viewed in this light serves a most excellent purpose. No occasion can be imagined more urgent for an interposition than the present. Every circumstance in the case seems to demand it; the dignity of the person, his innocence, his helplessness, the design laid against him with such depth and art, that, humanly speaking,

his ruin was unavoidable. We see in a moment the scheme of Herod disappointed, first, by the warning given to the wise men to return to their native country, instead of returning to Jerufalem*, then by the warnings to Joseph to fly to Egypt for the safety of the child, and afterwards to stay in Galilee †.

It also deserves our notice, that the designs of Herod against the life of Jesus form an important connection betwixt this event and some other events of considerable figure in the scripture-history; as they also gave occasion to the accomplishment of some prophecies respecting the Messiah. It cannot weaken the merit of prophecy to observe, with many writers, that this word is sometimes used in a large sense, as signifying not only the accomplishment of events foretold, but such a resemblance betwixt events as strikes the imagination so powerfully, that the one event is in effect a picture of the other. Thus, what can be more strongly marked than the resemblance betwixt the miraculous prefer-

* Matth. ii. 12.

† Matth. v. 13.

vation of Jesus Christ on this occasion, and the deliverance of the Israelites from the power of their enemies? “I have called my Son out of Egypt.*” Or what could paint in more lively colours, the lamentations of the mothers over their murdered children, than the figure of Rachel weeping for her children, and not to be comforted; pointing forward to the distresses of the tribes of Israel, and beyond them to the present and more tender distresses of her own descendants †?

But there are two prophecies, strictly so called, which this event was the occasion of accomplishing; one of them respecting the place of the birth of Jesus, the other, the place of his frequent residence before he appeared in a public character. To the activity of Herod we are indebted for an unexceptionable evidence of the reality of the prediction, that Christ should be born at Bethlehem ‡, and that in fact he was born there; a prophecy no doubt the more alarming to Herod, as

* Hos. ii. 1. Matth. ii. 15.

† Jerem. xxxvii. 15. Matth. ii. 16. 18.

‡ Matth. ii. 6.

this place had already produced David, a great and victorious king, and as long after his death the prophecy was delivered concerning one who should arise out of it to be a ruler of Israel *.

IN accomplishing the other prophecy respecting the residence of the Messiah, Herod was indeed only the occasion. Joseph, warned by an angel, and kept awake by his fears, retires with his charge to Galilee and dwells in Nazareth †, a place which, though mean to a proverb, yet by the prophets was pointed out, first, as the city of the Messiah, and afterwards as the scene of his mighty works ‡. If any man should be dissatisfied with this event as the accomplishment of a prophecy, he cannot however refuse, that it strikes by its resemblance to another event which happened long before, in several respects extraordinary ; I mean the appearance of Samson, who is spoken of as a Nazarite from his birth ||, and who by his death, as well as by his life, was

* Micah v. 2.

† Matth. ii. 22, 23.

‡ Isa. ix. 1, 2, 6, 7.

|| Judg. xiii. 7.

remarkably distinguished as the deliverer of his country.

S E C T. V.

Of his Genealogy.

IN tracing the history of an illustrious person, we experience a natural curiosity to be informed of particulars, which would appear frivolous in the history of a private man. If a hero or philosopher be the subject, we expect to hear not only of his wife sayings or renowned exploits, we expect to be gratified with knowing every minute circumstance relating to him. The virtuous peasant may have no more to record him to posterity than a turf or a stone, while the skill of the artist must be exhausted in recording the line of the lawgiver, the patriot, or deliverer of his country.

OF this condescension to an allowable curiosity, and to the ordinary way of treating such subjects, we have a remarkable instance in the genealogy of Jesus

Christ, as related by the historians. Two of them have treated of this subject with a fullness and precision which shews their sense of its importance, and of the dignity of the person to whom it refers. From one of these historians we have the pedigree of Jesus by the mother, from Abraham downwards *. From the other we have the line of the supposed father, in an ascending series, up to Adam himself †. This is agreeable to the ordinary supposition, that St Matthew, the former of the two, wrote his history for the benefit of the Jews, and that St Luke had regard to the Gentile world.

But these splendid genealogies were meant for something more than the food of our curiosity. It is not enough to say, that they contain nothing which is improper. Their utility seems to be abundantly obvious, if we attend to the great veneration in which family-genealogies were held by the Jews. No genealogical table could be more splendid than that which is here given of Jesus Christ, in respect of antiquity, or of

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* Matth. i. 1.

† Luke iii. 23.

the number of illustrious ancestors. We have taken notice of the humble circumstances of his descent. We know how much this was a subject of offence to a people fond of parade, and expecting a temporal deliverer. For removing the offence, this account of his genealogy is excellently fitted; it appearing from hence to the whole nation of the Jews, that Jesus of Nazareth, though obscure in his birth, had on his side the advantages of a noble or rather a royal pedigree, being sprung from Abraham the founder of their nation, and from Solomon the wisest and greatest of their kings. Wise men are able to distinguish and to admire real dignity, though attended with every external disadvantage. But names and titles, and other such dazzling appendages, are almost necessary to draw respect from the undiscerning bulk of mankind.

SUPPOSING these genealogical tables to be true, they serve the more important end of furnishing us with a mark by which we may be satisfied that Jesus is the Messiah. Several of his progenitors

were remarkable types of him. It had been expressly predicted and promised to others, that from them the Messiah was to descend. Here we have the satisfaction to observe how these predictions and promises were accomplished. Adam, after the fall, had been comforted with the promise of one of his descendants, styled "the seed of the woman," who should arise to humble the power of his enemy *. God had promised to Abraham, that, in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed †. He had promised to David a son or descendant of whom Solomon in all his glory could be only the faint resemblance ‡. The circumstances of the pedigree of the Messiah were still more fully foretold by the prophets. The tribe was pointed out, even the family from which he was to issue. No nation on earth ever equalled the Jews in the exactness with which they preserved their genealogies. Other nations perhaps might think this extremely ridiculous. But it

* Gen. iii. 15. † Gen. xxii. 18. ‡ Psalms
lxxii. 89.

was a serious matter with them, and to us it is of high importance. Jesus Christ, in his reasonings with the Jews, appeals to their genealogical history of the expected Messiah, and leaves them from thence to draw the unavoidable conclusion *, that he was the person.

C H A P. II.

Of the Circumstances preparatory to his appearing in a public Character.

IT was proper that Jesus should not appear in the world, till the world was in some measure prepared for the event. We discern a like propriety in his not appearing to the public eye, without a preparation suitable to the dignity of his character.

It is astonishing, that the wonderful circumstances of his birth and infancy should have made so feeble an impression on the minds of men. His first appearances in public life were not, like those

* Matth. xxii. 41.

of the Baptist, distinguished by the expectation of multitudes. Their minds must have been either strangely infatuated, or they must have imagined, that this illustrious infant, an object of the adoration of some, and of the attention of many, had been cut off by the sword of Herod. The obscurity of Jesus in early life has been matter of offence, and, at first sight, may be deemed unfavourable to the success of his public ministry. I shall therefore begin with showing, that this is a circumstance destitute neither of beauty nor propriety.

S E C T. I.

Of the Obscurity of his private Life.

FROM the evangelists we know very little of the history of Jesus after his return out of Egypt, when he came to dwell at Nazareth, till the very eve of his public ministry. We are only told that when a child “ he was filled with wisdom,

“ and the grace of God was upon him * ;
 “ that at the age of twelve he astonished
 “ the Jewish doctors in the temple, and all
 “ who heard him, by his understanding
 “ and answers † :” After which he returned
 to his retirement at Nazareth, where he
 was subject to his parents, “ increasing in
 “ wisdom and stature, and in favour
 “ with God and man ‡ .”

The obscurity of this early period of the life of Jesus is observable in almost every particular : For instance, in his living at Nazareth. Had providence ever designed, that the passages of his early life should be public, Jerusalem no doubt would have been pitched upon as the place of his abode. But, if he was to live for some time disguised, or at least not the object of general observation, Nazareth was, of all others, best fitted for this purpose. It was a small town in a remote province of Judea, mean and contemptible to a proverb ; from thence no prophet had arisen, nor ever was expected to arise ; so that, if Je-

* Luke ii. 40. † Vers. 46, 47. ‡ Vers.
 51, 52.

fus was to live for some time unobserved, no place could furnish a more fit retreat.

THIS very circumstance of his obscurity seems to be beautiful and proper, by its tendency to add splendor to the public character in which he afterwards appeared.

THAT “a prophet is not without honour save in his own country and in his own house,” is a proverbial observation founded on truth, and suggested to every one from the ordinary experience of the world. Jesus, in the course of his ministry, had occasion to experience the truth of this proverb; for, when he came into Galilee, and appeared in the synagogues, giving displays of his wisdom and his mighty works, they were offended at him, and for no other reason, but that he was well known among them *.

HAD he appeared in the city of Jerusalem, and in the country of Judea, under the same disadvantage, the consequence is obvious.

* Matth. xiii. 54, 57.

THE force of novelty on the mind of man is universally allowed. Every day we have the experience of its effects, and in the most ordinary instances, even when we reflect not on the cause. If an object be not only new, but strongly contrasted by its opposite, it must strike still the more irresistibly. With respect to great characters, this observation almost invariably holds. Some of the greatest have appeared as the ornaments or wonder of society, favoured by the novelty of their aspect. We might mention some who were the founders of mighty empires, others their deliverers, each of them distinguished by an early obscurity; by this very circumstance striking the senses, gaining the hearts, or overawing the passions of men, respected by them in their lives, and by the power of superstition held as divinities after their death *.

MOSES the lawgiver, and David the greatest king of the Jews, were looked upon by that people to be types of the

* Romulus, &c.

Messiah. In several particulars, the resemblance is strong, and in none perhaps more than in the obscurity by which great part of their lives was distinguished. Moses indeed spent the early part of his life in the court of Egypt, in a kind of splendid disguise. But as soon as he was inspired with the noble design of delivering his country, he forsook a station endeared by habit, and big with the highest prospects, for an obscure retreat in the wilderness of Sinai, where he kept the flock of Jethro, and lived unknown to his country for forty years, till he was called forth to that honourable station for which providence had designed him *.

DAVID, it would appear, had lived from his infancy in his father's house at Bethlehem. When the first mention of his name is made, we find him employed in keeping his father's sheep in the wilderness. From thence he was sent for, first to be anointed king of Israel, and afterwards to fight against the enemies of his country. His obscurity threw a lustre both on his military

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* Exod. ii. 13. Acts vii. 23.

achievements, and on the crown he wore; on his overcoming Goliath with a stone and a sling, and on his feeding and guiding the people of Israel *. In like manner, the obscurity of Jesus, and the long continuance of it, gave him the advantage of appearing with singular majesty in a public character. Before the prejudices of men had time to work, his appearance charmed the public, his doctrines and miracles astonished it, and his fame was spread abroad through all the neighbouring regions †.

FROM his situation in early life, all the doctrines and all the miracles of Jesus derive a peculiar advantage. In Nazareth, the place of his constant residence, there was no prophet, no school of the prophets, nor any person from whom he could receive the assistance which we would judge necessary for one appearing as the founder of a religion. Few of the great philosophers that have appeared in the world look on themselves as originals; but

* Psal. lxxviii. 70. 71. 72.

† Matth. iv. 25. 26.

modestly refer to some other person at whose school or by whose maxims their system was formed.

It is known from experience, that high accomplishments of any kind are not usually to be acquired, without much labour, and without having the advantages which arise either from study or from the knowledge of the world. Some allowance must be made for extraordinary genius and native endowments. There may be choice plants, which thrive best in the shade; yet there are few which do not require both the warmth of the sun and the skill of the dresser to bring them to perfection. The early obscurity of Jesus, and his long residence in a place equally mean and illiterate, naturally suggest to us, that the extraordinary endowments with which he was adorned were not derived from external helps, nor acquired with labour. In the same way we conclude that the doctrines and miracles of his public life were his own native

exertions, and originals in their kind, without being indebted in any respect to human policy or art. The early situation of Jesus Christ was precisely similar to that of his forerunner, concerning whom it is said, that "he waxed strong in the spirit; " and was in the desert, till the time of " showing himself to Israel *."

THERE is one most beautiful circumstance in the obscurity of Jesus, that must not pass unnoticed. I mean, the occasion which was given, and which he finely improves, of recommending by his own example filial piety, one of the most important duties of ordinary life. We know it is the subject of the fifth command of the moral law, of which God is the author; and the wisest legislators have always treated it with respect. A disregard to this law commonly serves to heighten the ignominy of an abandoned character. A regard to it necessarily enters into the virtuous, nay, often adds to the merit of the heroic character.

* Luke i. 80.

It is to be observed, that Jesus Christ, in his sermon on the mount, where he explains many other precepts of the moral law, gives no explication of the fifth command. Afterwards indeed he takes an opportunity of censuring the abuses which superstition had introduced and confirmed. But he gives no explication, either because it was unnecessary to explain it, or perhaps because he had been so eminent a pattern of filial duty in the early part of his life. "Jesus was subject to his parents" till he entered on his ministry. The dignity of the pattern gives an importance to the duty which no law could communicate.

THIS whole period of the life of Jesus spent in retirement is usually attributed to his great humility; but it deserves some notice, that his obscurity was enlightened by one public exhibition; and one was sufficient for the purpose of rousing and awakening the minds of men: I mean his appearance in the temple at the age of twelve*; a period when the understanding of youth begins to open,

* Luke ii, 42. 46. 47.

and when hopes begin to be formed of the figure which they are likely to make in the world. Anecdotes of this kind, which occur in the lives of illustrious men, are attended to with peculiar pleasure, and in description they sometimes derive an artificial colouring from the pencil of the historian. This passage in the life of Jesus only one Evangelist relates, and without parade or embellishment. But it has the effect of surprising us by its novelty. It strikes, because we do not expect it. It darts forth like lightning from the cloud. Yet surprise is not the only feeling we experience: It charms and attaches, and for a moment unveils the eminence of his public character.

S E C T. II.

Of the Ministry of John the Baptist.

THAT the appearance of the Baptist was intended to prepare the world for the appearance of his master, is a position which rests not on his own testimony. Both before and after his birth, he is characterised “the prophet of the highest, “who should go before the face of the “Lord to prepare his ways*.” Besides, the same prophets who foretold and described the appearance of the Messiah, make mention of the appearance of such a messenger as one of the marks by which he would be known†. This part of the history shews how well the appearance of John answered the purpose of rousing and exciting the attention of men to him whose messenger he was.

THE vulgar of mankind, in every age, have been much addicted to show in mat-

* Luke i. 17. 76.

† Mal. iii. 1. ch. iv. 5.

ters of religion. The Jews in particular were much under this prejudice. It was agreeable to their natural bias ; long habit confirmed it ; and it was interwoven with their hopes of a temporal deliverer. Jesus was soon to make his entrance on the stage in a guise not at all corresponding to their hopes and wishes. But, in indulgence to the prejudices of men, we see him introduced by a harbinger, the singularity of whose appearance was well adapted to create attention. The preparations which had been formerly made were either at too great a distance, or not powerful enough, to produce the effect. The humble appearance of Jesus was an obstacle which their pride or prejudices could not easily surmount. It was therefore of great importance, to devise some scheme for removing this obstacle. Now, this was the very effect meant to be accomplished by the ministry of the Baptist, that “ every valley might be filled, “ and every mountain and hill brought “ low ; that the crooked ways might be “ made straight, and the rough ways made

“ smooth, and all flesh might see the salvation of the Lord *.”

THE public character of the Baptist was in every respect fitted to procure regard to his message. For several hundred years no prophet, nor any pretending to that character, had appeared in Israel. To this generation a prophet was quite a new object. Their curiosity must therefore have been powerfully excited, both to see such a person, and to know what he had to say. The character of a prophet was also highly honourable. The ancient prophets were sometimes ill used by the generation in which they lived, but their posterity respected them ; and it is not to be doubted, that by a long disuse the character must have been endeared. The Baptist claimed to himself that very character, and founded his claim on the authority of the prophets, who had predicted his appearance.

THE aspect of his personal character is no

* Luke iii. 5. 6. Isa. xl. 3.

less venerable. In forming our opinion of any character, the minutest circumstances are taken into the account: They may be thought trifling, yet they make a mighty impressior on the bulk of mankind. A person's dress or diet, for instance, may be thought an article too inconsiderable to enter into the estimate. Yet great effeminacy in either abates the esteem which we have for any person. On the contrary, simplicity and austerity serve to heighten it, when in other respects also the character is supported with dignity. The testimony of such a person may with greater safety be relied upon, if it appear that he has no selfish interests to support or gratify. The following circumstances in the description of the Baptist are therefore full of meaning and propriety. "The same John had his
 "raiment of camels hair, and a leather
 "girdle about his loins, and his meat was
 "locusts and wiid honey *."

To this external figure, his temper

* Matth. iii. 4.

and conduct entirely corresponded. His mind was ever serious ; his manners were austere ; a strength of spirit, unyielding to the humours of men, characterised the whole of his behaviour. An early retirement from the world had favoured these propensities in their progress, and his public office as a reformer, joined to the iniquity of the times, made them break forth violently through every obstacle. Though his message to the world was such, that he must have been earnestly concerned for its success ; yet he would not stoop to recommend it by the arts of soothing or address, but plainly and roundly delivered his message.

To preach harsh doctrines, to attack favourite prejudices, without respect to persons or opinions, to tell men of their faults, to press them with the consequences, and urge them to their duty, were the tasks which were necessary to be discharged, and for which the boldness of an Elijah seemed to be necessary. With the spirit which distinguished the ministrations of that prophet, the Baptist entered upon his own. To a people conceited

of their sanctity, his doctrine must have been extremely offensive. But, unshaken by fear, and superior to their favour, he attacks them in their strong holds, he unveils their delusions, and warns them to flee from the wrath to come *. To attack barefaced vice, is a bold task: But to pull off the mask which hides the secret vices of the heart or life, shows a boldness which only few possess, and which fewer can exert without hurting themselves or the cause they engage in. Yet this boldness did the Baptist successfully display both against the Sadducees and Pharisees who came to hear him.

BUT the zeal of the Baptist did not rest here; it spared not the vices of the great, more than the hypocrisies of the vulgar. John ventures into the presence of Herod, and testifies against his most infamous crimes with a vehemence and plainness which do great honour to his character †. Though he was imprisoned, and afterwards beheaded

* Matth. iii. 7. 8. † Matth. xiv. 3.

for his zeal; yet it does not appear from the history, that he suffered in the good opinion of Herod, or of the people. On the contrary, it appears, that his memory was highly esteemed by both: All the people held him as a prophet; and Herod, upon hearing of the fame of Jesus, imagined that it was the Baptist risen from the dead *. Jesus himself therefore, with great beauty, urges the esteem which the world had for the character of John, in support of his testimony. “What went
 “ye out into the wilderness to see? A
 “reed shaken with the wind? But what
 “went ye out for to see? A man cloth-
 “ed in soft raiment? But what went
 “you out for to see? A prophet? Yea
 “more than a prophet†,” referring to the distinguished honour conferred on him beyond any other prophet, of preparing the way for the appearance of the Messiah.

THE manners of the Baptist had the effect not only of making his character respectable, but of gaining the con-

* Matth. xiv. 2.

† Matth. xi.

fidence of men, and of possessing them with a full opinion of his integrity. Some time after his first appearance in public, a message was sent him inquiring who he was; a message sent by authority from Jerusalem and delivered by the priests and levites*. “Nay they ask if he himself was that prophet,” meaning thereby the Messiah. Here was an opportunity, presented to one of a dishonest mind, to have assumed to himself the highest honours: But his integrity stood in the way, his sacred regard to truth, and to the honour of his commission, as well as the just views he had of himself compared with his illustrious master. In the same disinterested language he spake to the multitude, on whom it is always easy to impose, and who often form their opinions by appearances or fancy: “As the people were in expectations, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ or not†;” John at once unde-

* John, i. 19.

† v. 19.

ceived them, and put an end to their doubts and inquiries on the subject. Of their prejudices in his favour he takes no advantage, except to heighten in their eyes the figure of the person whose harbinger he was: “I indeed baptize
 “with water unto repentance; but he
 “that cometh after me is mightier than
 “I, whose shoe latchet I am not worthy
 “to unloose *.”

THERE is one circumstance arising, not from the character, but from the history of the Baptist, which ought to give weight to his testimony: I mean, that Jesus was not personally known to him, when this testimony was emitted. The Baptist would never have said so, had it not been matter of fact: It would have been easily disproved; besides, the supposition is improbable, and utterly inconsistent with the sincerity of his behaviour. His being unacquainted with Jesus in the early part of his life, or before he appeared in public, is a presumption, if not a proof, that there was no concert or col-

* Matth. iii. 11. Joh. i. 30.

lusion ; no engagements entered into to support their mutual credit and character. Considering the similarity of their early lives spent in retirement, the insinuation of concert might have been thrown out, and urged with some plausibility. The Baptist saw this, and provided against it by his public and repeated declarations to the world : “ I knew him “ not, but that he might be made manifest to Israel, therefore came I baptizing “ with water *.”

DID the austere manners of the Baptist require an apology, it might be observed, that they derive a peculiar grace and softening from his humility. In ordinary characters, these two qualities are very seldom found connected. Great severity to others is usually thought to imply in the person himself an overstretched opinion of his own excellencies. Besides, if we shall suppose, as in the present case, that the person is just emerged out of obscurity into some conspicuous station in life, this connection of qualities

* Joh. iii. 31.

will always appear with advantage. By the force of contrast, they not only agreeably surprize, but reflect beauty on the whole character and at the same time on each other. John was compelled to speak of himself: On this subject he talks with delicacy. He says nothing but what is natural and just, and what the occasion requires. We see no vain pretensions to humility in opening his instructions, nor any design of establishing it as a part of his character. But, struck with the dignity of his master, and with the misplaced honours which the admiring multitude were on the point of bestowing, he sinks in his own eye into nothing: “ I am the voice of
 “ one crying in the wilderness, Make
 “ straight the way of the Lord. He it is
 “ who cometh after me, is preferred be-
 “ fore me, whose shoes latchet I am not
 “ worthy to unloose †.”

THE doctrine of the Baptist points out with the utmost clearness the intention of his ministry. His capital doctrine was

* Jo. i. 17. 23. 27.

repentance, than which none could be better adapted to prepare the minds of his hearers for a spiritual Saviour. It was wisely fitted both to humble their pride, and to remove their prejudices ; to shew them the absurdity of expecting a temporal Messiah in the person of Jesus, and the danger of trusting to privileges which could not avail them. To a nation so corrupted, such truths would no doubt be as austere and forbidding as the manners of the teacher : But he was faithful to his trust, undisturbed about consequences. It was his task to awaken in the minds of men a sense of their danger ; and his success was amazing. From Jerusalem, Judea, and the regions beyond Jordan, they flocked together at the summons, “ and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins *.”

It is indeed to be suspected, that their professions were insincere : However, the alarm given had the very best tendency. Repentance was a duty taught and en-

* Matth. iii. 6.

forced by the prophets ; but the fitness of the duty could never be clearer, nor its necessity more pressing, than at this period, when a kingdom of righteousness was about to be established in the world.

BAPTISM was the external mark by which John distinguished his disciples ; a distinction excellently fitted to prepare the world for the appearance of Jesus. The prophets of the Old Testament, as has been observed, preached repentance to the people ; but their ministrations had never been distinguished by baptism. This mark was almost peculiar to the ministry of John, on that account styled the Baptist : It was fitted to excite general attention, to express the design of his own ministry, and at the same time of the ministry of Jesus, which was soon to follow. On this occasion, John gives the preference to the ministry of his master, with the ardour which had distinguished the preference given by him to his character. “ I indeed baptize with
 “ water, but he shall baptize you with the
 “ Holy Ghost and with fire. Whose fan
 “ is in his hand, and he shall thoroughly

“purge his flour; he shall gather his
 “wheat into the garner, and burn up the
 “chaff with unquenchable fire *.”

But the baptism of John principally deserves our notice, as it produced an interview, perhaps the first interview, between Jesus and the Baptist. It gave occasion to Jesus to put a mark of honour on the ministry of his forerunner, by attending it in person, and receiving his baptism; an honour which though John modestly declined, yet, in obedience to his master, he was forced to accept. The whole transaction exhibited in the eye of the world, was well adapted to fix the attention of the spectators on him who was now declared to be “the Son
 “of God, in whom he was well pleased †.”

I conclude this section with observing, that as the ministry of John was meant to be preparatory to the ministry of Jesus, and as the character of the Baptist gives weight to his testimony; so his character, of itself, deserves our notice, as presenting

* Matth. iii. 11.

† Matth. v. 17.

a striking contrast to the character of Jesus.

THIS observation we make without depreciating the character of the Baptist, which stands on such good foundations, the merit of the qualities he possessed, and the repeated testimonies of his master. Nor is it to be thought, that the character of Jesus needed any foil to recommend it: But, as two opposite colours never shew so full separately, as when spread out on the same canvas; so the austerity of the one character, and the mildness of the other, are heightened by the contrast. This is a reflection which an acquaintance with the variety of characters among men will justify: What, for instance, can give a higher relish to the gentleness of a friend, than the severity of those whom we may occasionally converse with?

THE austere manners of the Baptist are liable to no censure, and require no apology. They were suitable to his character and office. He had the charge of rousing the attention and alarming the fears of

men. In this bold tone he both began and ended his ministry.

JESUS entered on his ministry full of grace and truth; and by these, as principal characters, the whole of it was distinguished. Merciful and mild on almost every occasion, he was never severe, but from the motives of pity: Descending to the innocent intercourse of social life with the worst of men, on purpose to make them better; indulgent to his friends, and with his latest breath praying for his enemies. That the generation of men, among whom he lived, were not charmed with his manners, is to be charged, where it ought, to the peevishness and perverseness of their temper. They took offence at the austerities of the Baptist, and from the same froward temper, the same persons took offence at the compliance of his master. Hence they incurred the following just and severe censure:

“Whereunto shall I liken this generation?
 “It is like unto children sitting in the
 “markets, and calling unto their fellows,
 “and saying, We have piped unto you, and
 “you have not danced; we have mourn-

“ed unto you, and you have not lament-
 “ed. For John came neither eating
 “nor drinking; and they say, He hath
 “a devil.” The Son of Man came eating
 “and drinking, and they say, Behold a
 “man gluttonous, a wine-bibber, a friend
 “to publicans and finners *.”

S E C T. III.

Of the Temptation in the Wilderness.

THIS transaction must necessarily have a place among the events preparatory to the appearance of Jesus in a public character. The order of time, the nature and spirit of the event, require this arrangement.

In order to explain it, many curious questions have been put by learned men, and many curious solutions have been given. Our task is to explain the temptation of Jesus as preparatory to his public ministry.

To discern its propriety, in this view, it is necessary that we attend to

* Matth. xi.

the occasion of his appearance in the world. Scripture-history informs us, that the devil, envying the innocence and happiness of man, tempted him to disobey God, that he might partake of his guilt and his misery. Man was tempted, and yielded to the temptation. But God, not willing that he should perish, provided a remedy. This remedy was promised to the first parents of mankind, and the manner obscurely hinted in which it should operate : “ The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent *.” The promise was as particular as was necessary for comforting the persons to whom it was made : Afterwards we see it gradually opening towards the period of its accomplishment, and at last fully explained and accomplished in the appearance of Jesus Christ. The success of the tempter against mankind was the occasion of this promise being made, and to defeat him, in his turn, was the end of its accomplishment.

THE end of Jesus appearing in the world was, therefore, to destroy the works

* Gen. iii. 16.

of the devil. On this memorable occasion, we see him setting about it with infinite propriety. By encountering and defeating the devil himself, which he did on this occasion, he knew that his kingdom would be more effectually destroyed, and that he would have to deal on all occasions with a baffled enemy. This propriety of procedure we find him illustrating in the following metaphorical description; at least the description most easily applies to it.

“ When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace. But, when a stronger man than he shall come upon him and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour, wherein he trusted and divideth his spoil *.” Jesus was the stronger one, who overcame the devil and who attacked him in his strong holds. His subtilty was the armour in which he trusted, and of which he was stripped in the present conflict. His spoils were the idolatries of men, which Jesus overcame by his doctrine, which as trophies adorned his cross †, and afterwards gave

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* Luke xi 21, 22. † Colos. li. 15.

a lustre to the spiritual victories of his apostles.

THE circumstances in which Jesus entered on his temptation are very observable, and such as would do honour to human nature in any of her extraordinary exertions. It was not enough that the trial should appear as an unavoidable step of abasement, or as an act of voluntary obedience to the will of heaven. But with patience he waits for the enemy, and engages him with ardour *. The eve of his public ministry was the season best fitted for engaging in such an enterprize. Accordingly, the history informs us, that “then Jesus went out into the wilderness.”

THE solitude of the place gave the tempter a fair opportunity of attacking him with advantage; yet it was forty days before he began the attack. Afraid of his adversary, he waits still a more favourable opportunity, and the long fasting of Jesus at last presented it. He fasted forty days after the example of Moses and Elias, who, with this preparation, en-

* *Utro prodiit in arenam. Calv. in loc.*

tered on their ministry. Out of this disadvantageous station he would not sooner remove, that his victory might be the more important in all its consequences. Malice, presumption, and subtilty, united in supporting the attempts of his adversary, who is baffled in every attempt, and quits the field to his conqueror.

C H A P. III.

Of his Ministry before the Imprisonment of the Baptist.

THE imprisonment of the baptist is the period at which we expect to find Jesus beginning to appear in a public character. Accordingly, by three of the sacred historians, this event is fixed down to that period. They professedly treat of the public life of their master. Without touching on any one incident after his baptism and temptation, previous to the imprisonment of John, they proceed immediately to the subject of their history.

BUT there are some beautiful incidents

omitted by them, as not absolutely necessary in the execution of their plan, which are produced by another historian. This person was the friend *, as well as the disciple of Jesus, and who therefore writes his history, more in the stile of private memoirs, than any of the other three. In the first part of his history, we see a chain of incidents linked together in regular connection, stretching out to the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus. These incidents form more properly the introduction to his ministry, than the ministry itself. During this period, we see Jesus acting with a reserve which was not thrown off till the imprisonment of the baptist. His ministrations were not so open and public now as afterwards; they consisted chiefly of interviews with particular persons; and if there are any transactions of a public nature, they seem to have been designed only as samples of those brighter displays which were immediately to follow. Any person who attentively reads over the last

* John.

fection of the first chapter of John, with the second, third, and fourth chapters of that historian, will perceive the propriety of this observation. Two reasons may be assigned, why Jesus chose to act with some reserve during this period of his ministry; a respect for the reputation and a respect for the office of his forerunner.

THAT, on the appearance of Jesus, the reputation of John should begin to decline, is an event for which we are prepared; we would rather be surprised if it did not happen. It is beautiful to observe, how industriously Jesus avoided such appearances as might eclipse the lustre of the Baptist. He did not indeed give him any public testimony, while John was discharging his office. This might have invalidated their mutual testimony, as if they had engaged by concert to support one another. But, on the decline of John's ministry, the delicacy of his conduct is very observable. The disciples of John were stung with envy by the rising fame of Jesus, and complained of it to their master *; but they did not, and could not

* John iii. 26.

ascribe the change to any formed design of overturning his reputation in the world. Nay, it was on the very occasion of the disquiet of these disciples, and of the general attention beginning to be diverted from the Baptist, that we are told of Jesus leaving Judea, and retiring to Galilee, his wonted retreat *.

IT was the office of the Baptist to prepare the minds of men for the appearance of the Messiah, to preach repentance, and exhort men to bring forth the fruits of repentance. For this preparatory work some time was necessary, both to deliver his testimony, and that it might operate with success. It was therefore expedient, that he should be allowed to carry on his ministry without any or with little interruption.

THE great ends of the ministry of Jesus, and of his forerunner, were in effect the same; yet their offices were distinct, and each had his own peculiar sphere of action. As John was exceedingly delicate in the point of encroaching on the office

* John iv. 1. 2. 3.

er of assuming the honours of his master, so he too observed a like decorum in conduct. He would not encroach on the office, or press too closely on his forerunner, but chose to keep off at a distance, to observe the effects of his labours, and to seize the favourable moment of improving them. This juncture did not arrive till John was imprisoned; and no sooner did it arrive, than Jesus openly and fully asserted his own character. Now was the time, when the prospects opened by the Baptist must be exhibited more fully, or vanish for ever. He who had testified of the Messiah, who by his doctrine and baptism had raised the expectations of the world, was now in the power of his enemies. In this moment of agitation and suspense, Jesus appeared in all the glory of his public character, beginning his doctrine where John had begun and ended, “preaching repentance for the remission of sins *;” and afterwards, both by his doctrine and miracles, declaring himself to be the very person to whom John

* Matth. iv. 17.

had given testimony*. A regular succession of any kind gives pleasure, especially when it ascends from less to greater. In spring the trees begin to bud, blossom in summer, and produce fruit in autumn. The feeble light of the moon and stars is succeeded by that of the sun rising in all its splendour. John was a burning and shining light; but when his course was about to be fulfilled, another light arose more glorious than he, shining with an unborrowed beauty and brightness, emphatically styled the Sun of Righteousness, that true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

FROM what has been observed, we may see, that by the appearances of Jesus before the imprisonment of the Baptist, he never intended to disturb this connection in office betwixt himself and his forerunner; on the contrary, it appears that he was solicitous to preserve it. He did not at this period fill up the number of his apostles. He satisfied himself with

* John x. 41.

two disciples of John, who had been directed to him by their master, and with two other disciples whom he called to follow him, that his actions and conversation might be sufficiently attested. But the most entire satisfaction on this head arises from the particulars, which it is proposed to examine in the following sections of this chapter.

S E C T. I.

Of his Interview with Nathaniel.

It has been observed, that this period of the ministry of Jesus was chiefly filled up with interviews between him and particular persons. On these occasions, we find him employed in removing the prejudices that were rising in the minds of men against him, in preparing them for a brighter display of his character, or in giving such views of his religion as would put them in the proper disposition for receiving it. For the first

of those purposes, I mean that of removing prejudices against him, this interview with Nathaniel gave a seasonable opportunity.

It is of the highest importance to the success of any doctrine or scheme whatever, that they to whom it is proposed should think favourably of the person proposing it. If we entertain prejudices against him, his schemes may be fine, they may be firmly supported; yet we shall neither perceive their strength nor their beauty. The favourite prepossession, like a false medium, will give a crookedness to the straightest line of conduct. Every action, every word will be unfavourably interpreted. To judge therefore both fully and clearly, in the first place, prejudices must be removed. The influence of prejudices is not the less on account of their being trifling or unreasonable; for the more they are so, by the perverseness of our nature, they will operate the more effectually in darkening the mind.

In this interview, we cannot avoid observing the absurdity and unreasonableness of Nathaniel's prejudice. The mo-

ment in which he hears of Jesus, and that he was of Nazareth, he concludes from thence, that he cannot be the Messiah *. This prejudice is only one of many that were afterwards thrown out against Jesus, in the course of his public ministry : But it was the first and earliest. On this account, we should conclude it to have as much weight as any one prejudice ; especially if we also consider the facility with which this one, and no other, then occurred. Yet the prejudice had no better foundation than a proverb, and a local one too. It could only form a popular objection, but cannot be supposed to have any weight in the balance of reason or of common sense. “ Can any good thing come out of Nazareth ? ” saith the proverb, an obscure village in a corner of the country, distinguished only by the smallness of the number, and by the general ignorance or unpolishedness of its inhabitants. A person of larger views can look a little

* Joh. i. 46.

farther, and can easily imagine great ability both forming and displaying itself amidst similar disadvantages. Experience also is no less unfavourable to the proverb, as might be illustrated from a great variety of instances * : On this proverb, therefore, there was no ground for sentiments disadvantageous to the character of Jesus. On the contrary, as has been already observed, the circumstance of his long residence in Nazareth issues to his advantage †.

LET US next attend to the character of the person avowing the prejudice, and on what occasion he avowed it. Had he been possessed of the hypocritical spirit of the times, and of the persons who afterwards appeared in the opposition,

* The instance of Bœotia, one of the states of ancient Greece, is very remarkable. They were a proverb among their sprightly neighbours, for the heaviness of their understanding ; yet they produced Epaminondas and Pindar, a general and a poet, both distinguished by uncommon sublimity of genius.

† Chap. 2. sect. 1.

such a declaration would create little surprize. But he was the reverse in every respect, even to a wonder: “An Israelite indeed, in whom was no guile*.” He must therefore be supposed to speak on this occasion the undisguised sentiments of his heart. Nay, so strongly was he biaſſed by the popular proverb, that it counterbalanced the whole force of the testimony of Philip, that this Jesus of Nazareth was he “of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write †,” for whom it is to be presumed he had the highest reverence. Yet these very prejudices, joined with the character of the person, add weight to the testimony which on full conviction he gave to Jesus. We view it as the testimony of an honest man, at the same time of an adversary, and of an adversary conquered by the power of truth: “Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel ‡”.

* Jch. i. 47. † v. 45. ‡ Joh. i. 49.

BUT this interview principally merits our notice, as it gives occasion to observe the graceful manner in which Jesus proceeded to remove the prejudices of his disciple.

It is very observable, that prejudice or opposition seldom fails to produce enmity in the breast of the person who suffers by it. The ignorance, the infirmity, nay the integrity of the opposer, in vain are pleaded as an excuse. The merit of an opponent can make an impression only on a noble mind. Jesus appeared on all occasions full of grace and truth. His behaviour on this occasion is peculiarly descriptive of his character. We have seen that the prejudice of Nathaniel was most absurd and unreasonable; Jesus with great kindness avoids bringing the charge of absurdity against him. The prejudice was personal; yet he gives him none of the language of resentment, nor discovers the feeling of it. With candour he overlooks his weakness, delighted with merit equally valuable and rare. He characterizes him on his approach, not on

purpose to gain him by the soothing arts of address, but to prepare his mind for what afterwards he was to convince him of; that he who knew him so well, without ever having seen him, who knew his heart, and was conscious to his integrity, must be the Messiah spoken of by the law and the prophets.

IN dealing with the prejudices of Nathaniel, Jesus gave an early and agreeable preface of the manner in which he chose to obviate the prejudices of the world against his person or religion; not by methods of violence, by giving men hard names, or hard usage of any kind; not by fire and sword, as some religions have been established, or as some false votaries have attempted to establish his own religion; but by the humane, though persuasive, method of argument and proof.

IN obviating the prejudices of Nathaniel, he also took the occasion which was offered him to bestow an encomium on sincerity; a virtue excellent in itself, and necessary in all inquiries on the sub-

ject of religion. Here is the instance of a person prejudiced against a religion, because he is prejudiced against its author. But his sincerity got the better of his scruples, as soon as the truth, supported by proper evidence, was proposed; giving thereby a beautiful illustration of that apothegm in the gospel: "If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light *."

It may be also observed, that the proof which Jesus gave, on this occasion, of the dignity of his character, was not a public one, nor of the same kind with those proofs which adorned and confirmed his public ministry. But it was a satisfactory proof to the person himself, which was all that the occasion required; and served as a sample of the more powerful and public evidences which were soon to follow. This is finely intimated in the words of Jesus to Nathaniel immediately following the profession of his faith at the conclusion of this interview: "Be-

* Matth. vi. 22.

“ cause I saw thee under the fig-tree be-
 “ lievest thou? thou shalt see greater
 “ things than these. Verily I say unto
 “ you,” (directing his discourse to all that
 were present), “ hereafter you shall see
 “ the heaven open, and the angels of
 “ God ascending and descending upon
 “ the Son of man*.”

S E C T. II.

Of his turning Water into Wine.

IT is necessary to interrupt for a little the subject of the conferences of Jesus during this period. There are other incidents previously recorded, some of which gave rise to them. Thus the conference with Nicodemus, which stands next in order, plainly took its rise from the miracles which Jesus wrought in this period of his ministry.

* Joh. i. 50.

Of these miracles none are particularly recorded except this one now under consideration, unless we chuse to view the action next related, the purifying of the temple, as miraculous also.

THE miracles of this period were excellently fitted to rouse the attention of men to the performer, and to persuade them that his commission was divine. In both of these lights they appeared to Nicodemus; nor was it possible he could view them in any other. Jesus had not at this time proposed or explained his doctrine; so that it cannot be said the miracles now wrought were intended to confirm it. They rather bear a resemblance to the miracles of Moses before the giving of the law, which were wrought on purpose to convince both his own nation and Pharaoh that God had sent him. This assertion does not invalidate the propriety of the miracles which followed the publication of the gospel. If there be any suspicion of this kind, it must proceed on the mistake, that if a person can work miracles, the world will implicitly receive as divine whatever truths he proposes. This

is the sentiment of philosophy, and of sound reason. But on vulgar minds, the same impressions must be often renewed. A first impression perhaps is strong, but it may be easily effaced. Under its influence, the man may be worshipped as a God, who is in danger the next moment of being stoned as a malefactor *. If a new system be proposed which bears hard on the prejudices and passions of men, they forget that the person has already proved his mission to be divine; they expect, they insist on new proofs in confirmation of that system.

IN this view the miracles of Jesus after the publication of his doctrine may be considered as acts of indulgence to the prejudices of mankind. But the miracles of this period have quite another aspect, and their objects were entirely distinct. They served the purposes of giving the world the alarm, of rousing its attention to the person performing them, and of exhibiting samples of the greater miracles by which the doctrine was to be

* Moses—Paul, Acts xiv. 11. 20.

confirmed. Besides, some of them are distinguished by their reserve: A person who attends to these and the other circumstances of the present miracle, can never allow himself to think it either mean or improper.

In the first place, the working of this miracle was wholly accidental. This was seldom the case with the more public miracles of Jesus. On these occasions we see him often sent for when at a distance, to the place where, and by the persons in whose behalf the miracle was to be wrought. But here he was casually present, and an accident, of which no person must have thought, gave occasion to the miracle. To suppose that the whole was a concerted scheme, shocks all probability. One must suppose, not only that the relations and disciples of Jesus, but that a large company met together on a joyful occasion, did gravely enter into the concert. It would appear that neither the disciples of Jesus nor the guests expected a miracle. The historian with much simplicity informs us, that the mother of Jesus, who had

long pondered in her heart the early pre-fages of his real character, applied to him to exert it on this pressing occasion.

It is also to be observed, that Jesus performed this miracle in pure indulgence to importunity. There is not one feature of ostentation in the whole, no eagerness, no ardour in seizing the offered occasion of displaying his power. He only yielded to the sollicitations of his friends. He had been a pattern of filial duty in the early part of his life. He chose to recommend it by almost the first action of his ministry, as afterwards he did it by one of the concluding actions of his life *. But the present was not the season for the brightest displays of his divine character. These increased by degrees, as the world could receive them. To publish his doctrine, and to work miracles for confirming it, were the great objects of his ministry. He had at this time neither published his doctrine, nor, in effect, had entered upon his ministry : With some degree of reluctance he sets about a miracle, though

* John xix. 25. 26. 27.

with ease he performs it. The not attending to this circumstance, and the inconvenience of a translation, must be assigned as the causes of offence which some persons have taken at the answer of Jesus to his mother, whom on all occasions he honoured and loved: “Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come *.”

THIS miracle has a peculiar beauty, as it is finely expressive of the character of Jesus, and of the genius of his religion. It illustrates what is said of him in words, that he was “full of grace,” and justifies his religion from the charge of unnatural severity. The accepting of an invitation to a joyful solemnity; his working a miracle when he had scruples about doing it; in short, a delicate attention to the circumstance of the distress, paint his character in more lively colours than words can describe. They peculiarly distinguish it from that of his illustrious harbinger who appeared in the world neither eating

* The harshness of the words in our translation beyond those of the original is evident to any person skilled in the Greek tongue *τί μοι ἐστὶν καὶ σοὶ*

nor drinking, austere in his own manners, and uncomplying with those of others; and they distinguish his religion from the gloominess and rigour of preceeding dispensations.

BUT it must not be forgot, that this miracle was an act of condescension, and that it was exhibited on purpose to raise the expectation of more. In the mean time, it served the purpose of disposing the minds of men to receive with attention the doctrine of Jesus, and of giving a dignity to the office upon which he was entering.

THAT one miracle should produce the expectation of others, perhaps of greater ones, is, I apprehend, a most natural progress, whether we view a miracle as an address to our reason, working in the way of argument, or as an address to the imagination on purpose to excite wonder. One argument produced in support of a cause, naturally leads us to expect more. But when once wonder is excited, the imagination cannot contain within known bounds; it expands itself throughout the vast regions of possibility. And if we take also into account the reverence

which miracles inspire for the power producing them, we can assign no limits either to their greatness, or to their continuance, as long as they can be supposed to serve any valuable end.

THE miracles of Jesus make a very considerable figure in his public life, and will deserve to be a subject of separate examination. The present was only the beginning of his miracles, an introduction or prelude to what was to follow. It was done in Cana of Galilee, an obscure village in one of the most remote provinces of Judea. Hence the circumstances both of the place and time considerably balance the lustre of the miracle, and remind us of the reserve which, as has been noticed, runs through the whole period now under consideration.

S E C T. III.

Of his purifying the Temple.

THIS action, in the strict view of being miraculous, must yield to the

former. But the defect is supplied by a variety of circumstances. The nature of the action, its being so public, its uncommonness, and the ease with which it was performed, were circumstances which happily conspired to rouse or to fix the attention of the spectators on the person performing it, as well as to express one of the ends of his appearance.

FROM the history it appears, that Jesus was twice employed in purifying the temple; once in the commencement, and again toward the conclusion of his ministry. His engaging at this juncture in a task so difficult and important has a peculiar propriety. He had not yet begun to instruct publicly, but he was soon to do it. Agreeably to the spirit of his present ministry, and according to the custom of these times and countries, he begins his instructions by an action significant of one important end of his ministry, namely, the testifying against corruptions in the service of God, as a preparatory step to his introducing a more pure and sublime worship.

WHAT corruptions in this article pre-

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vailed in the Heathen world, their own histories inform us ; histories written by persons whose interest it was, as men of sense, to give the most plausible account of their religion. That great corruptions were introduced into the Jewish worship, we know from scripture-history ; and these accounts none of their own historians ever attempted to disprove or invalidate. What necessity there was for an immediate reformation on this head, the present piece of history informs us :
 “ And the Jews passover was at hand, and
 “ Jesus went up into Jerusalem, and found
 “ in the temple those that sold oxen, and
 “ sheep, and doves, and the changers of
 “ money sitting *.” It was high time that corruptions so enormous should be cor-

* John ii. 13. 14. All expositors agree, that the space in the area of the temple thus profaned must have been the outer court of the Gentiles, and done in contempt of them. The clearing the temple of these nuisances was in effect vindicating the Gentiles from contempt ; a circumstance which gives this action a most benevolent aspect, as expressing the abolition of all external distinctions under the gospel.

rected and reformed, as it was highly proper that one appearing in the character of a reformer should begin his attack on this quarter. Worthy notions of God and of his worship are the best, the only foundations of religion, and of the whole superstructure of morality. To clear away the rubbish before laying a new foundation, was therefore the natural method of procedure: According to this method, we see Jesus proceeding on the present occasion; thus introducing the instructions which he was afterwards to give on the general subject of religious worship.

THIS action of Jesus was also an indication of the dignity of his character. The reforming of corruptions in divine worship is a work which no person without great dignity of character could ever attempt with success. Providence has sometimes raised up extraordinary men for this purpose. But the corruptions were now so great, and so deeply rivetted, that the appearance of a divine person seemed to be necessary for the enterprise.

ERRORS of this kind take a faster hold of human nature than errors on any other subject, and are with more difficulty combated. They are gilded over with the name of religion, or rather religion is made use of as a bulwark to defend the corruption, and all attempts to destroy it are deemed irreligious. The Jews of this age were no less remarkable for their abuses in the service of God, than for tenacity in adhering to them. They sat secure in their strong holds, the sacredness of their temple and pretended purity of their worship. To be attacked in these, was therefore very alarming. To hear their temple, the house of prayer, defamed as a den of thieves; to be conscious that the charge was too well founded; to see with their eyes the chastiser of their iniquity going on in his work openly, yet without interruption, and even threatening the ruin of their temple, must have conveyed to the minds of all who were present the most sublime idea of the dignity of his character. The unexpectedness, the rapidity and success of the action, ought to have remind-

ed them of that ancient prophecy, describing the action itself, and glowing with the majesty of the performer: "The Lord
 "whom ye seek shall suddenly come into
 "his temple, even the messenger of the
 "covenant in whom ye delight: Behold,
 "he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.
 "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he
 "appeareth? For he is like refiners fire,
 "and like fullers soap, and he shall sit as
 "a purifier and refiner of silver: And he
 "shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge
 "them as gold and silver, that they offer
 "unto the Lord an offering of righteousness *.

As to the sentiments of the disciples of Jesus on this occasion, our imagination is left to its utmost liberty. Their surprize and astonishment were probably too great

* Mal. iii. 1, 2, 3. There is no inconsistency in saying, that Jesus acted at this period with reserve, and yet exercised his authority in a public manner. During this period, his public character was veiled by the early obscurity of his life and by the humility of his appearance. Hence the spectators of the present scene charge him with presumption, and demand a sign.

for description; on which account the historian with great delicacy has drawn a veil over this part of the scene. What their sentiments were at this time, we can conclude only from what we know afterwards, when they had seen more, and could judge with more coolness. Probably the hurry and violence of the action, the unwonted severity of their master, a severity too against their temple and worship, would, like a flash of lightning, overpower and confound them. But when they had time to reflect, and were furnished with better lights, they saw the propriety of the whole procedure, applying to him words descriptive of himself, as well as of his illustrious ancestor, who was in many respects a type of the Messiah: "The zeal of thine house hath eaten
"me up *."

It is almost unnecessary to defend this action from the imputation of riot or outrage. The dispositions of Jesus were so much and so habitually on the side of gentleness, that, at any time when he departed from it, the occasion must

* Ps. lxix. 9.

have been great. Corruptions in religious worship cast a particular dishonour on God, and disgrace on human nature. Here then were objects which called aloud for exertions of the most ardent zeal. Besides, as has been observed, corruptions of this sort take always a fast hold, so that, without some violence, they cannot be dislodged.

As the action requires no defence on this quarter, so it requires none in an opposite one, the feebleness of the means employed in bringing it about: “ When
 “ Jesus had made a scourge of small cords,
 “ he drove them all out of the temple, and
 “ the oxen, and the sheep, and overturned
 “ the tables of the money-changers, and said
 “ to them, Take these things away hence *.”
 The apparent insignificance of the means, instead of being a subject of ridicule, is a circumstance which gives a lustre to the action, and to the person performing it. For it must be remembered, that the ancient nations of Asia, just as the modern natives of the western world, in all their important transactions, made use

* Jo. ii. 15.

of outward signs or actions to express their meaning. The Old Testament, especially the prophetic writings, are full of instances. In the New Testament, the instances of Jesus teaching his disciples humility, once by setting a little child in the midst of them, and at another time by washing their feet, will for ever be admired by all who have any just taste of what is beautiful or proper. In like manner, all the circumstances of his purifying the temple, are to be considered as emblematical actions, significant of his future office as a public reformer.

JESUS appears with dignity through this whole transaction. He shone the brighter, not only by the impotence, but by the curiosity, the ignorance, and prejudice of his opposers.

It was undoubtedly the interest of many persons then present to use their immediate endeavours to check the proceedings. But they were overawed and confounded; and their opposition was constrained to flow in another channel. The surprise both of the priests, and of the people, must have been great, from the opinion which they had of

the sacredness of their temple, and from the aspect of the person who thus presumed to call it in question. Prophets had been raised up in former ages, to testify against their corruptions. But the present appearance was a novelty; and the testimony now given to this generation must have been very unpleasant. A sign from such persons was therefore a plausible demand; and so condescending was Jesus, that he instantly gave them one: "The Jews said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, that thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up *."

THIS sign the Jews constructed in the literal sense. The historian, to prevent others from falling into the mistake, has told us, that Jesus "spake this of the temple of his body †." The sign, even in its literal sense, had an obvious tendency to prepare them for those exertions which were soon to give a splendour to his public ministry. In its remo-

* John ii. 18, 19.

† Verse 21.

ter application to his death and resurrection, it was fitted not only to gratify their curiosity, but to establish their belief in the dignity of his person, and the authority of his doctrine. In this light, the sign referred to was a distant one; but its importance, on that account, is not diminished. When God would give Moses a sign of the success of the enterprise on which he sent him, it is precisely of this kind: "When thou hast brought
 " forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall
 " serve God upon this mountain *." We may be apt to alledge, that a present sign in both cases would have been a great deal more to the purpose. But that the sign now given should be distant, and expressed in terms not quite obvious, is a circumstance not destitute of propriety. It accords with the reserve which distinguishes this period of the ministry of Jesus. It also shows, that he who gave the sign did not chuse to force assent by violence, or to pre-occupy the minds of men, before proposing to them his doctrine; that the honest and sincere might have the greater merit in recei-

ving the doctrine for its own sake; and that others, whom nothing less than miracles could convince, might leisurely and deliberately form their opinion. In this candid manner did he deal with the world, and even with his own disciples. For it was not till after he was risen from dead, that they knew the meaning of the sign: “ Then the disciples remembered that he said this unto them, and they believed the scripture, and the word that Jesus said unto them. *”

S E C T. IV.

Of his Interview with Nicodemus.

THESE interviews betwixt Jesus and some particular persons are equally instructive and entertaining. They throw a considerable light on the manners of the times, and on the characters of the persons with whom he afterwards had to deal in the course of his public ministry. They

* John ii. 22.

also gave him an opportunity of explaining his doctrine more fully than otherwise he could have done, consistently with the reserve which distinguishes this period. To us they give an amiable display of that beauty and propriety which is observeable indeed every where in the conduct of Jesus.

IN every history there is commonly a principal character, a striking figure in the piece. There are also under characters necessary to fill it up, and necessary to carry on the action of the history. Of these latter, none more irresistibly strike, none are more interesting, than such as bear a part in those scenes which are removed from common observation. Of this kind we have one now before us.

BUT this interview is chiefly observable, as it discloses the situation of the minds of men, when Jesus commenced his ministry, and at the same time discloses early with what gracefulness he accommodated himself to their views and conceptions.

IN the *first* place, it appears from this interview, that there were at this time impres-

sions made on the minds of some to his advantage. The impressions on Nicodemus were produced by the miracles which Jesus had wrought, at this early period, though only the samples of greater. Yet from these he concludes him to be a divine teacher. The conclusion was entirely natural, and required no uncommon discernment or sagacity to make it. As a Jew, and as a learned man, he must have known, that the legation of Moses was attested by miracles. Even without such a precedent, unprejudiced reason might have pointed out the conclusion. Besides the miracles now wrought, it is probable he might have in his eye the transaction of Jesus purifying the temple. He might view it as signifying the design of his appearance in the world, and the nature of his doctrine; in either of which lights, to ascribe his miraculous works to any other than a divine power, would have been a glaring absurdity. This absurdity was reserved for those persons to fall into, who afterwards, thro' prejudice and malice, appeared in the opposition. The pernicious leaven had not

yet begun to work. The general prejudices were formed; but those which were personal and particular had not yet time to show themselves. It is therefore reasonable to conclude, that at this period the opinions of men were formed with more justness, and consequently are more decisive of the truth, than afterwards, when almost all were blinded with prejudice, over-awed by authority, or inflamed by growing opposition.

THE sentiments of Nicodemus are the more extraordinary from the circumstance of his religious persuasion. He was of the sect of the Pharisees, a sect infamous for their ostentation, hypocrisy, and bigotry; vices which often excited the zeal of Jesus, and as often proved obstacles to the success of his ministry. But to these vices of his party he was entirely superior, resolved to see with his own eyes, and to have his eyes open to light and conviction. His station in life gives also a lustre to his testimony. None of the rulers for a long time after believed in Jesus. But here is one standing in the front of his disciples, distinguished from

the whole body of the rulers who were too proud to be learners, and too selfish to support merit which might eclipse or lessen their own.

It also appears from this interview, that the times were characterised by ignorance or fervility of sentiment. The great council of the Jews, of which Nicodemus was a member, was composed of men the most distinguished for learning and ability. We must suppose them to have been intimately acquainted with the writings of Moses and of the prophets. Yet such was their almost general blindness at this period, that they did not see, or pretended not to see, the person to whom these writings directed them. Even this person, who distinguishes himself by the sincerity of his views, yet obliges us to grieve for his ignorance and weakness; his ignorance on the subjects in which Jesus engaged him, his weakness in being ashamed or afraid of doing what he knew to be his duty. From this instance, we are safe to conclude concerning the body of the people, whose advantages and endowments cannot have been the same.

It is very agreeable to observe with what propriety Jesus improves this interview for the purpose of explaining to his learned disciple the terms of his religion. After the professions of regard expressed by Nicodemus, it is unnatural to suppose that he had no intention to become a disciple of Jesus. By the frankness of his professions, he in effect invites him to propose his own terms. An impostor, or one who establishes a system for worldly ends, had here a bait thrown out to him, which he could not have refused to grasp at; or rather had an opportunity of throwing out one, which with weak or corrupt minds never fails of success. He would have prescribed such terms as he was sure would neither deter nor perplex; or rather such terms as would gratify the passions and weaknesses of those he had to deal with *. Jesus on this oc-

* It was thus that Mahomet became so successful in propagating his imposture. He saw the corruptions of the people and age he lived in, and the subtilty of his genius suggested the use he was to make of them in bringing about his designs. To do all this

caſion had to deal with a diſciple, whom it was of ſome importance for him to gain: A perſon of candour whoſe intimacy one would deſire; of rank and ſtation in the world, whoſe influence over others might be very conſiderable. But did he deſcend on that account to cheapen the terms of his religion, or to accommodate them to the prejudices of his diſciple? This would have been incompatible with the character of a teacher ſent of God, the character which Nicodemus gave him. But, unburdened with conſequences, he declares without hesitation the ſtrict and high terms on which only he could receive his religion, or could hope to derive any advantage by receiving it. “ Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God *.” The language is indeed metaphorical, and to the diſciple was myſterious. But it is to be obſerved, that Jeſus was

work by force, was too bold. He therefore reſolved at the ſame time to treat with their vices.

* John iii. 3.

at this time employed in preparing the minds of men for fuller discoveries.

THIS interview is also very observable, as it discovers the particular attention of Jesus to the subject on which Nicodemus came to converse with him. By the evidence of the miracles, he had been persuaded that his teacher was divine: And Jesus in return bestows on the faith of the disciple a testimony extremely honourable. He descends to give him more particular evidence on the subject of his own character. It is not surprising, if in the progress of the interview, Nicodemus was shaken in his sentiments by the sublimity or mysteriousness of the doctrine. On this account the conduct of Jesus is highly proper, in presenting to him such views of his teacher as might satisfy him with what he heard of his doctrine, and dispose him to wish for more. On this occasion he makes mention of himself as “ speaking what he knew, and testifying what he had seen *.” A description

* Joh. iii. 11.

of his character as a divine teacher precisely corresponding to another given by the Baptist : “ No man hath seen God at
 “ any time, the only begotten Son which
 “ is in the bosom of the Father, he hath
 “ declared him *.”

JESUS also improved this interview to signify the open and extensive publication of his doctrine. This was a discovery excellently suited to the circumstances of the disciple and to this period of his own ministry. The private manner in which he was now setting out, the privacy of the present interview, his unfolding his scheme only to one person, in an evening-conversation, and doing it with an air of reserve, were circumstances which might have created some doubts in the breast of Nicodemus as to the extent of his teacher's commission. He might imagine, perhaps, that, like the Old Testament prophets, he was to confine himself only to a few, and to rest there without any farther publication.

IN order therefore to prevent or remove

* Joh. i. 18.

his mistake, Jesus thought fit to assure him, that a period was approaching when his ministry would be more public, and his religion exhibited in the sight of the world. The lifting up of the brazen serpent in the wilderness * was calculated to convey this truth in the most lively manner. No image could more fitly express the salutary nature of his doctrine, a subject which he afterwards resumes and explains ; nor is it stretching too far to say, that it glances at the public manner of his death. Nicodemus, no doubt, was far from diving so deep into the spirit of the assertion. Yet this is plainly the meaning, to which it is fixed by the words of Jesus himself, on a similar occasion : “ I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to me †.”

IN the progress of the interview, he unfolds in plain terms the salutary nature of his doctrine, and recommends it to his

* Joh. iii. 11.

† They were spoken on occasion of some Greeks desiring to see him, an occasion very proper for renewing the discovery; Joh. xii. 32.

disciple by the most powerful of all arguments, the love of God displayed in sending his own Son into the world. The occasions of treating this subject are so frequent, that it would be unnecessary in this place to enter upon particulars.

To conclude : This interview gives occasion to observe the tender concern of Jesus to prevent an anxiety which the unbelief of the world would naturally produce in the mind of his disciple. With the same compassionate attention we find him afterwards treating his own apostles, whom he chose to strengthen by the frequent mention of the unpleasing subject. To a person of rank, such as Nicodemus, the almost universal opposition of his age and country could not fail to be the cause of much inward disquiet. But he was kindly and candidly warned of the event. And, lest his reason and his faith should be staggered by the characters of the persons opposing, Jesus lays open the opposition at its source, the corruptions of their lives, with which his religion would

always be at enmity. This is justly alleged to have been the source of the unbelief of those times. There may have been other sources; but experience shows that this must have been the principal one: A circumstance which, instead of weakening, rather strengthens the authority of the Christian doctrine. The rejecting of such a religion can, in no view, be the interest either of sound philosophy or of plain common sense. There are some men who have a crookedness of understanding: Many are full of affectation, are wedded to old opinions, or are fond of new ones. But the bulk of unbelievers in every age are startled with the morals of the gospel: "They chuse
 "darkness rather than light, because their
 "deeds are evil*." Men are ingenious in deceiving themselves, where their reputation as men of virtue is concerned; and would rather be thought to act on principles, the intricacy of which it requires some skill to unravel, than on others which, if openly avowed, would

* Joh. iii. 19.

hurt the common sense and natural delicacy of mankind.

S E C T. V.

Of his Interview with the Woman of Samaria.

THE chronology of this interview is so precisely determined by the historian in his introduction to it*, that we are not at liberty to call in question this point; and as it stands last in order of time, it determines all the preceeding occurrences to have happened within the period which we are now considering; the ministry of Jesus before the imprisonment of the Baptist, when the fame of the one began to rise in the same proportion that the other was declining†.

THIS interview is not the least extraordinary of those recorded in this part of

* Joh. iv. 12.

† Joh. iv. 13. When the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, then he left Judea, and departed into Galilee.

the history of Jesus, whether we attend to the circumstances of the person with whom he entered into conversation, the graceful ease with which it was begun, or the conduct displayed in carrying it on, so as to accomplish the ends of this period of his ministry, the rousing the attention of the world, and giving them a gentle opening into the character which he was about to assume.

In the preceeding interview, we find Jesus engaged with a ruler of the Jews, who, by the fame of his miracles, or from having witnessed them, seemed to be in the best disposition for becoming a disciple. Here we see him discoursing with one of another sex and nation, a stranger to his character, an enemy to the people and religion of his country, and in no respect distinguished either for character or station in the world. There we have seen him acting with a dignity becoming his own character, as well as the rank and education of the person he conversed with. Here we behold him all condescension to the uncommon prejudices and infirmity of his disciple. There he allows himself

to be sought after, yet refuses not to talk with fulness and freedom. But here he offers himself without being asked, and seeks for an opportunity of conversation.

BESIDES these, there are other particulars in this interview deserving our notice in its rise, in its progress, and issue.

In the *first* place, it gives occasion to observe what degree of enmity subsisted at this time betwixt the Jewish and Gentile world, and the great expediency of one appearing in the character of a reconciler *. Heathen writers on all occasions speak despicably of the Jews, and the heathen world was despised by them in their turn. But of all nations on earth the Samaritans were the objects of their inveterate hatred. The animosity, which was mutual and on many occasions ridiculous, must, in this place, be traced to its source. After the revolt of the ten tribes, in the reign of Rehoboam, Judah and Israel became two distinct nations. Those revolted tribes, by their frequent captivities, became incorporated with the na-

* The apostle Paul dwells on this idea of our Saviour with peculiar pleasure. Eph. ii. 14.—Colos. i. 20.

tions who conquered them, and brought back with them into their own country a motley religion. They were looked upon as idolaters by the Jews, with this irritating circumstance, that they claimed a right in the object of their worship, and had erected a separate temple for his service. Religious differences, or rather differences about the externals of religion, are of all others the most apt to sour the minds of the vulgar, and where the difference is most inconsiderable, their mutual animosity is commonly the greatest *.

THE present incident paints this in the most lively colours. Jesus, wearied and thirsty with his journey in the middle of the day, and seated by the well, asks a drink from the Samaritan woman, who came out accidentally to draw water. One would

* This is a point of nice speculation, to be accounted for, not from the influence of religion to sour the mind, but in the same way that we account for similar appearances in ordinary life. We observe, that differences are fiercest, when they happen betwixt the dearest friends and nearest relations. This we do without reflecting injuriously on the sacredness of the ties either of blood or friendship.

naturally expect that the request would have been cordially complied with, and would have instantly called forth the exertions of pity : But wonder, as at the most uncommon appearance, seized every avenue of the soul ; wonder, not at the request, but at the person who made it. Such tendency toward reconciliation, such openness of intercourse, on the part of a Jew, though in a trifling instance, was what she had never seen, perhaps had never heard of. Hence, though she did not reject the application, yet, seized and struck with its novelty, she very naturally replies : “ How “ is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink “ of me, who am a woman of Samaria * ? ” The historian who relates this conference was aware, that the question might surprise many of his readers in after-ages ; and therefore, with great propriety, subjoins the reason of the question : “ For the “ Jews have no dealing with the Samaritans † . ”

ANOTHER thing observable in this in-

* Jo. iv. 9.

† Ibid.

terview, is the improvement which Jesus makes of it, to dispose the mind of the disciple in favour of his religion: “It
 “ was his meat and drink to do the will of
 “ his father, and to finish his work *.” He not only says so, but, on this occasion, he gives a bright display of it. His request to the Samaritan woman, and the surprise which it occasioned, were closely connected with the ends of his ministry. With ardour he seizes the favourable opportunity: Unmindful of the demands of thirst or fatigue, and only moved with compassion at the miseries which this scene presented, he resolves to remedy them. For this purpose, he describes his doctrine by a figure which the occasion offered, and which he finely accommodates to describe its nature and effects, “ Jesus answered and said to her, If thou knewest the
 “ gift of God, and who it is that saith, Give
 “ me to drink, thou wouldst have asked
 “ from him and he would have given thee
 “ living water *.” This figured description

* Jo. iv. 10.

Jesus thought fit at present to give, not that the disciple could perfectly understand it, but to prepare her mind for a more full discovery, and in the mean time to excite her affection for his doctrine as a desirable object. The expedient we find produced the intended effect, all her difficulties issuing in that humble and fervent request: "Give me this water that I thirst
"not, neither come hither to draw †."

FROM this interview Jesus also takes occasion to give her a distant and gradual opening into his character. The importance of the discovery which was about to be made, the slow and gradual steps which lead to it, the original ignorance of the person concerned, and the gradual progress of light in her mind, contribute equally to our entertainment and instruction. The discovery to be made, was that of the great Messiah, the desire of all nations. From the humble appearance of Jesus at the opening of this

* Jo. iv. 10.

† Jo. iv. 15.

scene, it was natural to imagine that he was no more than an ordinary person. When the conversation begins, all is darkness and disguise. As it advances, the veil is gradually withdrawn. The first request of Jesus produces nothing in the mind of his disciple, except the simple movement of wonder. But his reply to her question raises greater ideas than such as any ordinary person or occasion could suggest. These movements of wonder, these rising ideas of admiration are conveyed in terms which have nothing to recommend them but the charm of simplicity: “The woman saith to him, Sir, Thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; from whence then hast thou that living water? Art thou greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children and his cattle *?”

JESUS, with his wonted gentleness, next proceeds to undeceive her of this mistake, as another step towards disclosing his character; and as the most satisfying proof

* Jo. iv. 11, 12.

that he was greater than Jacob, mentions the superior blessings which he was able to bestow : “ Whofoever drinketh of this
 “ water fhall thirft again,” meaning the water of Jacob’s well ; “ but whofoever drink-
 “ eth of the water that I fhall give him,
 “ fhall never thirft. But the water that I
 “ fhall give him fhall be in him as a well of
 “ water springing up into everlasting
 “ life *.”

BUT one ftep yet remained previous to a full difcovery of his character. He difclofes himfelf to the Samaritan, as one who was intimately acquainted with her whole life and behaviour. Confcious of the truth of all he faid, ſhe believes him to be a prophet, and applies to him in that character to folve the grand fubject of difpute between the two contending nations, whether mount Gerizzim or mount Zion ought to be the place of worſhip †, a fubject by which their attention was fo deeply ingroffed, as to render them infenfible both to their vices and follies,

By the folution which he gave, her views of this prophet naturally riſe toward

* Jo .iv. 13. 14. † Jo. iv. 19. 20.

the idea of the expected Messiah * ; but the prejudices which she entertained about the Messiah would not suffer her to believe that this was the person. The time was now come, when her curiosity and anxiety must have been at the highest pitch, to know the character of this extraordinary person, and the meaning of the conference. Then it was that Jesus silenced all her doubts, by that gracious discovery, “ I that speak unto thee, am “ he †.”

It was observed, in a former section, that Jesus took occasion in this introduction to his ministry, to give a testimony against the abuses of the Jews on the subject of divine worship. Here we see him in effect exposing and correcting the errors of the Gentile world on the same subject. The worship of the Samaritans was indeed of a mixed kind, as has been observed : “ They feared the Lord, and served “ their own gods ‡.” Besides their idolatry as heathens, they were tainted with the prejudices of the Jews ; confining the

* Jo. v. 25.

† Jo. iv. 26

. ‡ 2 Kings

presence of the Deity to the mountain of Samaria, as the other did to Jerusalem, Jesus therefore sets out with declaring in the very entrance of his ministry, and it was of great importance for its success now to declare, “That God is a spirit, and “they that worship him must worship “him in spirit and truth*.” This was the best solution to the inquiries of the disciple, and stronger than any testimony that could have been given against those religious differences which mutually sharpened their minds.

It is observable also, how from this interview Jesus takes occasion to insinuate the calling of the Gentile world. It was the divine intention, that the Jews, from whom the Messiah sprang, should have the earliest discoveries of his religion. With such regard to this intention did Jesus proceed, that he instructed his apostles, at their first setting out, to “go only to the lost sheep “of the house of Israel†.” Yet this original preference, this particular attention to

* Jo. iv. 24.

† Matth. x. 6.

the body of that people, was by no means incompatible with shewing favour to one or to a few of another nation. The Samaritan woman in this interview has been considered as representing the Gentile world: Her nation was more hateful to the Jews than any other, and unlikely to derive any advantage by their means: Her ignorance, though she entertained the hope of the Messiah, her candour, her prejudices, in short her whole behaviour, was characteristic of the Gentiles as distinguished from the Jews. When we join to these particulars the behaviour of Jesus, his condescension to the ignorance and prejudices of his disciple, his zeal to instruct her preventing her desire to be instructed, and rendering him insensible to the demands of weariness and thirst, we must see, if we shut not our eyes, the following beautiful description of the Messiah accomplished: “ I am sought of
 “ them that ask not for me: I am found
 “ of them that sought me not: I said,
 “ Behold me, behold me, unto a nation
 “ that was not called by my name *.”

* Isaiah lxxv. 1.

WE are told, that “the disciples came
 “ in,” towards the conclusion of the inter-
 view, “and marvelled;” yet, from the de-
 ference they bare their master, they would
 not ask of him to explain it. According
 to his wonted goodness, he relieved
 their anxiety, as far as their own slowness
 and the limited plan of his ministry could
 allow. This is the meaning of the figu-
 rative description which he gives of the
 Gentile world, their unexpected ripeness
 for being gathered into his church, the la-
 bours of the apostles in this spiritual har-
 vest, and the pleasing prospect of success
 in their labours: “Say not ye, There are
 “ yet four months, and then cometh har-
 “ vest. Behold I say unto you, lift up
 “ your eyes, and look on the fields; for
 “ they are white already to harvest; and
 “ he that reapeth receiveth wages, and
 “ gathereth fruit unto eternal life; that
 “ both he that soweth, and he that reap-
 “ eth may rejoice together *.”

* Jo. iv 35. 36.

C H A P. IV.

Of the Choice of his Apostles.

BY the concurring accounts of two historians, it appears that this choice was made immediately after Jesus had entered on his public ministry *. By the same information, it is clear, that he entered on his ministry when he heard that John was cast into prison †.

WE are told that Jesus, in a very early period, called some disciples to attend him. Occasionally he invited others, and continued increasing them to the number of twelve, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel. One of the historians informs us in few words concerning the end of the choice: "That they
" might be with him, and that he might

* Matth. iv. 18.
with Matth. iv. 17.

† Luke iv. v. compared

“send them forth to preach the gospel *.”
 What subordinate ends we may suppose to have been in view, will be mentioned in the conclusion of the chapter. The propriety of this transaction is obvious in the two following particulars: The condition and characters of the persons chosen; and the methods by which Jesus attached them to him. It was a considerable time after this before he actually sent them forth to preach the gospel †.

S E C T. I.

Of their Condition and Character.

GREAT offence has been taken at the Christian religion, or rather at its divine Author, on account of the persons with whom he chose to associate, and to whom he committed the trust of publishing his religion. But this is so far from

* Mark.

† Matth. x. 1.

being a ground of offence, that, every circumstance considered, it has much beauty and fitness.

THE apostles were chosen out of the lowest stations. They were either publicans or fishermen, or in some of the obscurer occupations of life. To chuse such persons, or to associate with them, was repugnant to the maxims of human policy. This is the amount of all that can be objected on the subject. But from thence no conclusion can be made to the discredit of the choice. Philosophers may chuse to derive support from the fortunes and rank of their followers, and to have their lives and opinions handed down by them to posterity. The prophets usually made their appearance at the palaces of kings; but from both these orders of men Jesus chose to distinguish himself. The apostles were poor. Hence their minds were more tractable, they were the better disposed to accept of his intimacy, and to improve by his instructions. The attach-

ment of the rich was to be despaired of*. Hence the success of the apostles in establishing their doctrine would be the more confounding to the world, and a presumption would arise that the doctrine was divine. Besides, the external condition of the apostles was wisely fitted to undeceive the prejudices of the Jews in favour of a temporal Messiah. Had Jesus designed to establish a temporal kingdom, he must have associated with the great, he must have employed worldly power or policy to effect its establishment. By the choice of the means, the world, if they employed their reason, might have formed just conclusions concerning the end.

In capacity, and in knowledge, the apostles were defective. We excuse them from their condition in life, and from the influence of popular prejudice. Their prejudices were the growth of their own nation, fostered by the learning and policy of the age. On the sub-

* This is the obvious meaning of the following assertion: "It is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Matth,

ject of their master's kingdom, every method used for enlightening them failed of success. Of this truth, the scenes of Emmaus and Bethany, both after the resurrection of Jesus, are glaring instances. In the choice of such persons, we see the first opening of that beautiful plan upon which the religion of Jesus was established in the world, among persons distinguished by every species of ability. This is taken notice of by an apostle who was himself almost the only exception: "Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men, after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and base things of the world, and things that are despised, hath God chosen; yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are *."

THE apostles were not only weak in

* 1. Cor. i. 26. 27. 28.

understanding, but in conduct. On extraordinary occasions, they discovered some of the most ungraceful infirmities of human nature. Narrow-mindedness and ambition form their character during the ministry of Jesus; despondency and irresolution distinguish them in the critical moment of his danger. Yet, with these persons, he disdained not to connect himself; and even called them forth to the apostleship, that, by their engaging in so arduous a task, and executing it with constancy, the world might have an additional evidence, that God was with them. Peter was remarkable for his weakness, and was even surprized into perfidy. But, though he had denied and deserted his master, such was his boldness in defending his cause before the priests, the rulers, and elders of the Jews, that these persons, “perceiving them (*i. e.* Peter and John) to be ignorant, and unlearned men, marvelled, and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus *.”

R

* Acts iv. 13.

ONE of this chosen number astonishes us by the wickedness of his character. Have "I not chosen you twelve," says Jesus to the apostles, "and one of you is a devil?" He spake of Judas, that should betray "him." He did betray him: His crime was of a black dye: His name is devoted to infamy. Doth his character or his crime reflect dishonour on his Master? On the contrary, the choice and the fate of the traitor furnish a presumptive proof, that there was no secret confederacy in the family of Jesus, no criminal secrets in his conduct. If there had been any, they must have been divulged. The instance of this infamous apostle, is not without its use in another light; to prevent offence against the religion of Jesus, on account of the vices of its professors; and to serve as a monument of the divine displeasure against them, in the signal punishment and fate of the traitor.

THE diversity of character among the apostles is a circumstance not destitute of

its charms. Pictures of human nature, exhibiting it in all its possible varieties, are the greatest ornaments of history, and yield the highest pleasure to an elegant mind.

By this circumstance of the choice, Jesus also provided for the success of his religion in the world. It is a part of the infirmity of human nature, that truth is not always relished in proportion to its excellency. In order to be well received, much depends on the liking which we have to the person who proposes it, as this often depends upon his peculiar manner. Thus, softness and insinuation produce the same effects upon some, which boldness and argument produce upon others. It rarely happens, that one man possesses a great variety of talents, or that all of them are equally serviceable in the cause of truth. From different persons, characteristically distinguished, we look for the highest degrees of success.

THIS diversity, so remarkable in the case of the apostles, contributed without doubt to the success of their la-

bours: The benevolent spirit of John, the flaming zeal of Peter, the slowness and incredulity of Thomas, both by a natural tendency, and by the extraordinary direction they received, qualified them on the whole to be more extensively useful. The bulk of mankind are slow and unrefined in their apprehensions. Some are incredulous to an unreasonable degree. Others must have their passions agitated before they can contemplate religion with pleasure.—Hence the diversity of natural gifts among the apostles may be viewed as subservient to the supernatural ones afterwards bestowed; the usefulness, the beauty, and connection of which are finely illustrated in scripture, from the mutual connection and subserviency of the several members of the natural body*.

THE apostles of Jesus contribute their

* 1 Cor. xii. 14. “ For the body is not one
 “ member but many If the foot shall say, Be-
 “ cause I am not the hand, I am not of the bo-

share both to the beauty and profitable-
ness of his history as under characters.
His own character, which is the principal
one, is indeed so perfect and so amiable
that it requires no foil to set it off. But
the variety serves to relieve our minds,
which would be in danger of flagging by
a constant attention to excellency. Jesus
himself, though appearing in great humi-
lity, is on all occasions the object of ad-
miration. The apostles are just such per-
sons as we meet with in ordinary life;
men of like passions, subject to like infir-
mities. They exhibit the features of hu-
manity in its simplest form. Their con-
duct, though often weak, is to us an ob-
ject edifying and encouraging. As the
character of Jesus is a compleat one,
it strikes us with an awful respect;
we admire so great excellency, and are

“ dy; Is it therefore not of the body?” Thus of
the senses of hearing, seeing, and smelling: “ But
“ now hath God set the members, every one of them
“ in the body, as it hath pleased him.”

in danger of doing no more. But as soon as we turn our eyes to his companions, and observe the improvement which they acquired by imbibing his spirit, we are relieved from our fears, and our hopes are animated; we are directed and also excited to our duty: Thus children engage more chearfully in the amusements and exercises which belong to their years, by conversing with their equals, than with men of the largest compass, or the most improved understanding.

S E C T. II.

Of the manner of calling them.

AMONG the characteristical descriptions given of Jesus by the historians of his life, none delights us more than the following: "Full of grace and truth." It comes from the mouth of one who had the best opportunities of observing his

master *, and whose manner of writing is distinguished by its simplicity. But in no instance is this peculiarity of character more finely displayed, than in his conduct towards his apostles, and particularly on the occasion of calling them, “that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach the gospel †.”

In the *first* place, his manner on this occasion was familiar and affectionate. Jesus, as became a divine teacher, spake to the multitudes with authority, proposed the truths of his religion, proved them by arguments, and proceeded to use the various methods of persuasion. But from the beginning he dealt with his apostles as friends; as such he first chose them, as such he always treated them; affection directed by wisdom secured their attachment, and also gave them spirit in publishing his religion to the world. Nor was the familiarity of his manner unattended with dignity. The employments in which

* John see chap. i. 14.

† Mark.

he found many of these persons engaged were abundantly gainful, and in no degree ignominious *. In obeying the call of Jesus, they do honour to his authority, and to the merit of his choice, as far as it could be done by a chearful renouncing of present advantages, while their future prospects were to all appearance extremely unpromising.

THEIR being called separately is another circumstance also worthy of notice. Jesus formed this little society without ostentation, without artifice; by the same gradual method in which any regular society is formed. This circumstance prevents the suspicion which might have followed his collecting the apostles into a body at once, as if he had previously engaged them to appear at a signal. It also prevents the suspicions which might have arisen after his death, of their acting by an original concert among them-

* There is a vulgar mistake on this subject. Learned men have shown, from good authority, that the occupation of fishermen was very creditable in that country.

selves, in proposing their doctrines to the world.

THE apostles were also occasionally called. An impostor would chuse those persons to be the instruments of his designs, with whose talents and inclinations he has had an opportunity of being acquainted. Jesus was born in obicurity, and ipent the early part of his life in retirement from the world. To the apostles, though many of them his countrymen, he had been wholly unknown, and no evidence appears that they were known to him. The two first followed him on the testimony of the Baptist : We have little reason to doubt, that his choice of the other ten apostles was, humanly speaking, wholly accidental. He called one of them from the receipt of custom, as he was passing by ; and called four of them from their nets and fishes. The interview of Jesus with the four disciples, furnishes some incidents which merit our attention.

THE historian Luke, who relates this interview *, informs us that Jesus being

* Luke v. 1.—12.

pressed by the multitudes whom he was teaching near the lake Gennefareth, entered into the ship of one Simon, and taught them out of the ship. This incident of teaching out of the ship, a matter of necessity or convenience, Jesus determined to improve to a more important purpose. Having discoursed to the multitudes, he desires Peter to launch forth into the deep.

HE was now about to chuse the disciples as his companions, and to send them forth as the teachers of mankind. He therefore thought fit in the very entry, to point out to them a connection betwixt their old and their new employment; or rather to illustrate the latter by the former, in a way suited to their capacities and conceptions.

IT has been already observed, that not only by the images of objects or of actions, but by actions themselves, the Easterns often conveyed their meaning. A few illiterate fishermen would not have been much wiser, by a rational discourse from their master on the subject of their apostle-

ship, or by any of these instructions which we find he afterwards gave. He therefore at present only sets them a fishing; and from the incidents which then happened, an opportunity was presented of signifying the design of their being called, as fully as they could now apprehend that design; this is not done by applying to their judgement, but by setting at work their fancy: “Fear not, from hence
 “forth thou shalt catch men *.” A manner of expression precisely similar to what Jesus afterwards used, when describing his religion to his disciples, and, no doubt, with an allusion to their early employment: “The kingdom of heaven is like
 “unto a net that was cast into the sea †.”

THE success of their spiritual labours is also insinuated in the progress of this interview. The circumstances of the labour, danger, and success of the apostles in their fishing, are beautifully adapted to produce in them this sentiment: “They had toiled all night, and

* Luke v. 10.

† Matth. xiii. 47.

“ had taken nothing. On letting down
 “ their net they inclosed a great multi-
 “ tude of fishes, and their net brake.
 “ They beckoned to their partners, which
 “ were in the other ship, that they should
 “ come and help them. And they came
 “ and filled both their ships, and they be-
 “ gan to sink *.” It is not easy to say,
 whether great objects have more the ef-
 fect of elevating or of depressing the
 mind.

THESE opposite effects are by no means
 incompatible. We have an instance of it
 in the conduct of Peter, who by the pre-
 sent miracle was at once inspired with the
 deepest self-abasement. and with the most
 elevated sentiments of his master: “ He
 “ fell down at Jesus knees, saying, De-
 “ part from me, for I am a sinful man, O
 “ Lord. For he was astonished, and all
 “ that were with him at the draught of
 “ the fishes which they had taken †.” The
 meaning of this they did not, and could
 not see fully now; but they saw it and
 expressed it afterwards, when engaged

* Luke v. 6. 7. † Luke v. 8. 9.

in their spiritual labours. They modestly, yet firmly disclaimed all personal merit in their success, ascribing it wholly to the power of their exalted master *.

THE leisurely manner in which Jesus attached the apostles to him, is a circumstance peculiarly observable. By attending to the history, it appears, that in a very early period of his ministry, he invited some of them to follow him. After this, in a more explicit way, he required their attendance. Some time still intervened before he proceeded to chuse the twelve ; and still another period, before

* On occasion of the people wondering at the miraculous cure of the lame man by Peter and John, Acts xxxi.—12. Peter makes the following address : “ Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at
 “ this ? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as tho’
 “ by our own power or holiness we had made
 “ this man to walk. The God of Abraham, and
 “ of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers,
 “ hath glorified his son Jesus. And his name,
 “ through faith in his name, hath made this man
 “ strong, whom ye see and know : yea, the faith
 “ which is by him hath given him this perfect
 “ soundness in the presence of you all ;” Acts iii.
 12. 13. 16.

he sent them forth to preach the gospel. This circumstance has a variety of beautiful aspects.

IN the first place, this leisurely conduct expresses that candour by which Jesus is distinguished. We see him proceeding in the most honourable manner with his apostles. He neither compels them into his service, nor takes hold of the first fervors of their attachment, nor cuts them off from a retreat, in case they should regret their choice. It may afterwards appear a matter of surprize, that the twelve should retain an inviolable attachment to their master, till towards the last scene of his life: But not a little perhaps is owing to the manner in which it was formed. They could have no suspicion of interested designs in his choosing them, and were left at entire liberty to exercise their reason in every particular step of the attachment. An impostor, or one who means to carry on any dark design, would avoid proceeding by steps so deliberate. He would seize the very first advantages fairly laid in his way.

From a consciousness of the deceit of his own mind, he would be apt to suspect the inconstancy of the persons he had to deal with, and would therefore fix them down at once by some strong fetter, which they could neither have the skill nor the power to shake off.

By this gradual proceeding, the apostles had also the fullest means of being intimately acquainted with their master's character. It is an observation from common life, that those intimacies and attachments are always the strongest which are formed by degrees. Where they are hastily formed, and in a moment arrive at perfection, they are seldom found to be either durable or strong. For this reason the attachment of the apostles to their master must have proceeded on the best foundation. It must have sprung up, or rather have taken root, in proportion to the growing experience of his virtues. Where the light is strong, and when it is let in at once, we may be dazzled and confounded. But the gradual opening of the light, yields a more delicate pleasure, and besides gives the

advantage of a more particular observation. Hence the apostles had the best opportunity of being intimately acquainted with their master, of seeing his virtues in their proper light, and consequently of forming upon that model their own life and character.

THUS also a proper foundation was laid for the apostles entering upon their office. They talked to the world about a person, of whose public and private character their knowledge was leisurely acquired. Hence it is unjust to call them visionaries or enthusiasts. Jesus neither collected them into a formed society, nor sent them forth as his apostles, till they were furnished with the most striking proofs of his authority. They had witnessed his power in the miracles which he wrought. They were satisfied on the best evidence that they did well in following him. By his manners and virtues he had gained their hearts; so that both their reason and affections were engaged in his service. Under the influence of the former, they

could with truth declare to the world:
 “ We have not followed after cunningly
 “ devised fables, when we made known
 “ unto you the power and coming of the
 “ Lord Jesus, but were eye-witnesses of his
 “ majesty *.” Under the influence of the
 latter, they could also declare: “ We be-
 “ held his glory as of the only begotten
 “ of the Father, full of grace and of
 “ truth †.”

It has been observed, that Jesus called the disciples, whom he afterwards made apostles, at an early period of his ministry. This he did to inure them to hardships, and thereby to prepare them for the hazardous task of publishing his religion. Besides the extraordinary assistances which he promised them, they would have occasion for all the courage and hardiness they could acquire. Nor could it be acquired with greater advantage than by sharing every day the same hardships with their master, and by witnessing his distinguish-

* 2 Pet. i. 16. † John i. 14.

ed magnanimity under them. He called the disciples to be associates in his labours, that they might begin to act under his eye, and have the benefit of his example. It would be anticipating another period of the history to enter into an examination of their instructions: These will be found in their proper place. The event showed, that the disciples improved greatly by the instructions and influence of Jesus. Animated by his spirit, they spake the word with all boldness, God also bearing them witness with signs, and wonders, and gifts of the Holy Ghost.

C H A P. V.

Of his public Discourses.

THE first appearances of Jesus in the world were distinguished by their reserve: They introduce with much fitness and beauty his public ministry. Had he continued to act with the same reserve through his whole life, and to publish his doctrine only to a few, the consequence is obvious. But as soon as circumstances rendered it proper, he appeared in the most public manner. As soon as the ministry of the Baptist was fulfilled, he began his own, proceeding on the plan which he had already marked out by his private labours.

IN going over that early period, it was observable with what propriety Jesus improved every opportunity which presented itself, and sought after others, in order to prepare the minds of men for his more public appearances. We have found him,

in that view, discoursing of the nature of his office, his qualifications for discharging it, the dispositions necessary for receiving his religion, the prejudices of the world against it, and its more full publication during his personal ministry.

S E C T. I.

Of his Doctrine.

THE doctrine of Jesus necessarily comprehends all the instructions which he delivered as a divine teacher, on purpose to make men wise and happy. It includes either those truths which were entirely new to the world, or others, which, tho' not new, yet required to be more fully illustrated. Some of them are directly levelled against prevailing errors and vices; others contain plain rules of duty, and points of belief, together with the obligations of the one and the evidences of the other. The world stood in need of ha-

ving their system of opinions reformed and improved. They even stood in need of light on the subject of moral duty. It was also necessary that they should be urged to their duty, by such motives as were suited to the condition of guilty beings. By a perfect accommodation to the circumstances of mankind, the doctrine of Jesus both warms and enlightens. It sets in motion every active power of the soul, the hopes of men in the pursuit of virtue, and their fears in an aversion to vice.

THIS is the general view of the doctrine. Consider it in any light, it must appear to an unprejudiced eye beautiful and becoming.

THE doctrine of Jesus is distinguished by its simplicity. This characteristic of the doctrine is agreeable to the notion of a divine teacher, proposing new truths, or explaining old ones. It corresponds with the design of his public ministry, in which his doctrine must be proposed to all, but chiefly to the illiterate, on whom fine speculations are utterly lost. On this rock the Heathen world were ship-

wrecked. Their wise men, in the earliest ages, never thought of considering philosophy as a moral science; and even those who afterwards considered it in this just view, fell into such labyrinths of speculation, that they either bewildered themselves, or ran entirely out of sight of the vulgar. Jesus published his doctrine, not for amusement, but for instruction. The plain manner of delivering it, was therefore the natural one. If his manner appear to us on any occasion intricate, common sense directs us to attend to the manners of his hearers, or to their modes of expression; to both of which he gracefully accommodates himself. On the most sublime subjects, he talks with a simplicity, which shows they were familiar to him. Ordinary men, even the most exalted geniuses, sometimes fall into intricacy from the imperfection of human understanding. In attempting to raise their subject, they are in danger of being pressed down with it. For this reason the discourses of Jesus will be found to be more simple than those of his apostles, who, with all

the helps derived from inspiration, are often entangled with the intricacy, or born down with the weight of what they say. Of this, the apostle Paul, in his epistolary writings, is a remarkable instance.

THE doctrine of Jesus is free from error, and was published on purpose to testify against the errors of the world. Its purity in the first of these views will admit of no doubt. It rests not only on the divine character of the teacher, but on the fairness and clearness with which the doctrine is always proposed. With respect to his divine character, he is styled the true light, and this he proved by his works. The fairness with which he proposed his doctrine stands attested by his ensnaring enemies. To call in question the purity of any doctrine must be absurd, if we once allow that the person delivering it is incapable of being misled himself, and that he is raised above all suspicion of misleading others.

BUT the doctrine of Jesus also did openly oppose the interests of error in the world. The wisest men in the

Heathen world on some points were full of doubts, and thus were often innocently in danger of mixing error with truth. Others among them were not so delicate or scrupulous. With audacity they imposed their opinions, hurtful both to the understandings and to the morals of mankind *. The universality and long continuance of error made the situation of the world truly deplorable : In this situation Jesus appeared for its deliverance. The inveteracy and danger of these errors are the subjects with which he began, and which he took frequent opportunities of enlarging upon through the course of his ministry.

THE fulness of the doctrine is another circumstance very observable. A doctrine or system may be wholly unexceptionable, and at the same time very incompleat. If it consist wholly of a set of principles, without any relation to

* Matth, xxii. 16. Among the Jews, the traditions of the elders had become a plentiful source of error.

practice, or of a set of dry precepts, without touching the great springs of action, the doctrine may be just, and yet a very incompetent guide either in opinion or conduct. In the doctrine of Jesus there is a fulness which satisfies, and a variety which charms. Other systems, compared with it, are like streams of water, or small veins of ore. His doctrine is like the fountain which never runs dry, or like the rich mine which has never been exhausted. In the productions of human wisdom, there is either an emptiness or some mortifying defect. But the doctrine of Jesus is commensurate to our largest ideas, or rather exceeds them. We feel a satisfaction in the discoveries which it makes. We see the principles unfolded which form our obligations to duty, and every duty stated in its fullest light.

ANOTHER excellency of the doctrine of Jesus is its suitableness to the circumstances of the persons to whom it was delivered. That it was well suited to the case of the world in general, requires no illustration: But it is agreeable to observe with what fitness he applied it

on particular occasions. In his conduct, during the early period of his ministry, this is finely illustrated *. We wonder at that penetration which nothing can escape, not the vices nor the prejudices of each individual disciple. We are charmed by that grace with which he accommodates his doctrine to each, and triumph in the success of his labours. Every person must observe the difference betwixt one who talks by rote, and another who can gracefully accommodate himself to the circumstances of the person with whom he converses. In the course of his public ministry, Jesus had to deal not only with individuals, but with multitudes. He had to deal with their prejudices and vices almost as various as the multitude. He had to address himself occasionally to those who came to be instructed, or to catch at his doctrine, or whom curiosity prompted to hear him. To all these persons we see him adapting himself with the most beautiful facility.

THE unity or perfect consistency of the

* Chap. iii.

doctrine is a circumstance which must not be omitted. We are all sensible in some degree of the beauty of order, connection, and consistency in any work; we feel regret, even sometimes disgust, when they are wanting. But, where there is the utmost variety in the work, and it is at the same time uniform, we then conclude it to be, in its kind, perfect. No design can be more noble than the design which Jesus proposes by his doctrine, the rescuing men from error, the directing their views, and the regulating their practice. But there is not more nobleness in the design, than there is beauty in the execution, in the mutual relation betwixt the several parts, and of each part to the whole. No unmeaning speculations, no unnecessary intricacies to be found; nothing, in short, except what has a reference to the grand object of his doctrine, the comfort and instruction of mankind. He talks as one who has at heart their interests. His discourses for this reason are always uniform and edifying.

In fine, the doctrine of Jesus is distinguished by its sublimity. It does not de-

rogate from the sublimity of the doctrine, that the bulk of men have groveling views; that they seldom look towards the heights, and seldomer have the ambition to ascend them. This reflects only on their own weakness or indolence. A sublime doctrine is on that account proper to rouse them out of their indolence, and to spur them on to exert their best endeavours. It is rather derogatory from the doctrine of Jesus to say, that there is nothing mean in it; nor is it enough to say that it is exactly proper. These perfections, and others that have been mentioned, we cannot enough value. But it is the sublime of his doctrine which charms and elevates, which warms our affections, while it excites our admiration. In short, with truth it may be asserted, that it is in every respect suitable to the sublime idea of the Son of God from heaven instructing mankind. In order to reach the sublime in any science, the foundation must be solid: The farther we advance in speculation without this, every step becomes more dangerous:

In attempting to be more wise than others, we are in danger of becoming less so. Such is the imperfection of human wisdom. But in the doctrine of Jesus, we have the most sublime objects set before us in their native majesty, the most sublime principles of action proposed, together with the sublimest morals that ever were taught.

I conclude this section by resuming an observation made in the beginning of the chapter concerning the open publication of the doctrine. Had Jesus continued to teach, as he began, with reserve, it might have been alledged that he meant to propagate opinions which he durst not openly avow. But with pleasure we see all suspicion of this kind cut off by the public manner of proposing his doctrine. He discoursed to multitudes who came from every place to hear him. He began his discourses, by talking to them on subjects the most unpleasant and unpopular*.

* Matth. v. i.—12.

He unveils and disapproves of their prejudices; he attempts to reconcile them to sufferings. An impostor will artfully conceal his designs from the multitude who are to be wrought upon. He will commit his counsels only to a few, on whose fidelity he can rely. If the design must be published, the pleasing and agreeable part will first be produced, and every other part in its order, till the whole appears. In this way men may be caught before they are aware. By advancing a few steps with pleasure, they are encouraged to go on, and even after they see the deceit, shame or false notions of honour tie them down for ever.

As Jesus chose to discourse to multitudes, and with the utmost openness, so he discoursed to them in places of the greatest resort. Had he retired to the wilderness, when he came out of Nazareth; or had he been formed in the eye of the world, and then affected obscurity, it might have been suspected, that he meant to draw out the multitude, on purpose to carry on some private design. But when he appeared, it was on the great

stage of the world. The temple of Jerusalem, the city, the whole country of Judea, were the scenes of his instructions and of his mighty works. This circumstance furnished him with the proper defence against the accusations of his enemies. When the high priest asked of him, at his trial, about his disciples and his doctrine, Jesus answered him: “ I spake openly to the world, I ever taught “ in the synagogue, and in the temple, “ whither the Jews always resort ; and in “ secret have I done nothing *.”

THE truth is, there is nothing in his doctrine which made reserve necessary, after he began to publish it. It is however much for its honour, that it was candidly proposed, the articles at once fairly stated, in short all its difficulties represented so fully, that one would suspect there was a design of frightening men, instead of alluring them to embrace it. To speak of poverty, defamation, persecution, as their unavoidable lot, of self-denial, and even chearful submission, as their ne-

* Jo. xviii. 11, 12.

cessary duty, was never till then, nor has been ever since, the plan by which new opinions have effected their establishment. A life of pleasure in this world, and a purgatory, or sensual paradise in the next, have been the artful and too successful resources of modern times. Yet, without any of these resources, the doctrine of Jesus was proposed and embraced, recommended by its own excellency, and by the spiritual rewards which it offers to its votaries.

S E C T. II.

Of his Character as a Teacher.

A doctrine so excellent in every respect as that which we have been examining, naturally prepossesses us in favour of the person delivering it. In like manner, his character gives weight to the doctrine, and lays us under a necessity of attending to it. The counsels of a friend, of whose good offices or abilities we have had experience, operate very

differently from those of a stranger. We listen to them with attention; we receive them with cordiality. Their real value can neither be increased nor impaired, but their current value may, by this very circumstance.

THE character of Jesus as a divine teacher unfolds itself almost in every page of his history. It is a subject on which we find him often obliged to enter, on purpose to refute the objections of his adversaries, or to recommend his doctrine the more effectually to the unprejudiced. Much may be collected from his general conversation in the world, and from his conduct on particular occasions.

IN the first place, the character of Jesus as a teacher is aggrandized by his personal dignity. This again all his miracles illustrate, especially his resurrection from the grave. Every day we see how much the judgments of men are swayed by outward appearances, more than by the reason of things. Few can submit to the trouble and labour of enquiry. An argument addressed to the senses

is more pleasing to the bulk of mankind, and likewise more persuasive. Hence we are easily inclined to subscribe to an opinion, if we are once convinced of the dignity of the person delivering it.

THE humble guise in which Jesus appeared put the Jews to a severe trial. They not only felt the power of that bias common to all, but they were disappointed in their hope of a temporal deliverer, and were disgusted by the disappointment. They rejected the doctrine from mere prejudice against the person; nor would they listen to the evidences produced in his behalf. On the subject of his personal dignity Jesus often discourses; not prompted by jealousy of character, but by the ardent desire of instructing and reforming mankind: The success of his doctrine required it. He wrought miracles during his life, to convince the world of his real character: He refers them to the events which were to follow his death and ascension; and upon these he rests his cause. This is the meaning of his

discourse in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, and of that long series of discourses, beginning at the fifth chapter of John.

OF the importance of this point to the success of his doctrine, the last named historian seems to have been fully sensible; the divinity of his master being the topic with which he sets out, and which he takes all opportunities of introducing in the progress of his history.

THE character of Jesus as a teacher also derives lustre from his intimate knowledge of the subjects of which he treats. The importance of this particular, in order to the good reception of any doctrine, requires no illustration. Mankind are prone to doubt and distrust: He must therefore be clear of all doubts, who sets up to guide them. The wisest and most penetrating among the ancient philosophers were often in great uncertainty. Their influence also was confined within a very narrow circle. Lawgivers, whose influence it was necessary should be more positive, and who had to deal with the out-

ward conduct of men, have pretended to inspiration *.

BUT even inspiration, in its just sense, does not give us full satisfaction on this head: For, though the notion of it is natural and conceivable, yet it is only a borrowed knowledge, which may be quite just, but is far from being either so striking or satisfying as that which issues straight from the fountain. The prophets of the Old Testament, whom we believe to have been inspired, were no more than the channel through which the stream flowed, and was conveyed to others. Of the messages which they were ordered to deliver, they often did not understand the meaning. They delivered them with fidelity to the world, and at the same time made them the subject of inquiry †. An intimate knowledge of the truths with which it was proper for mankind to be acquainted, was the characteristic of him who appeared as a divine teacher, and who, on this distinguishing quality, rests his

* Numa.

† 1 Pet. i. 18.

claim to the character: “ No man hath
 “ seen God at any time, the only begotten
 “ Son which is in the bosom of the Father,
 “ he hath declared him *.” This is the
 meaning of that long discourse, beginning
 with the following assertion: “ I am the
 “ light of the world, he that followeth me,
 “ shall not walk in darkness, but have the
 “ light of life †.” The wonder of the ene-
 mies of Jesus, their astonishment and con-
 fusion whenever he spake, may be viewed
 as an honourable testimony to his character.
 They were acquainted with the circum-
 stances of his early life and education, on
 which account their surprize at his appear-
 ance was extremely natural: “ Whence
 “ hath this man this wisdom? How know-
 “ eth he letters, having never been
 “ taught ‡?”

His knowledge of the heart of man is
 another distinguishing excellency of Jesus
 as a teacher. Most men can see no fur-
 ther than the outside of human na-
 ture; it belongs only to men of great

* Jo. i. 18. † Jo viii 12.

‡ Matth. xiii. 54. Jo. vii. 15.

genius to unfold the mysteries of the heart, to touch its secret springs, and give it a direction of which it is scarcely conscious. To establish opinions, to enact and enforce laws, or even to overturn them, requires no uncommon capacity among a rude people, or in an unpolished age; but in an enlightened age, among a people wedded to customs endeared by antiquity, and jealous of encroachment; I say, in such a situation, to introduce a new system subversive of the old one, without applying to the arts either of violence or deceit, naturally suggests the idea of a largeness and comprehension of which human nature is scarcely capable; yet all this did Jesus effect. He began to effect it by his personal ministry, and conducted himself so pertinently on every occasion, as to convince even his enemies, that “he knew
“ what was in man *.”

It is, however to be observed, that this faculty in Jesus exceeded any thing

* Jo. ii. 25.

that we can suppose human nature to be capable of. In him dwelt all the fulness of the Divinity : Hence the actions and sentiments of men at once lay open to his view. Of this we have a memorable display in the early period of his ministry, and at the same time of the sentiments to his advantage which it produced : “ Come,” said the woman of Samaria to her fellow-citizens, “ and see a man which told me “ all things that ever I did. Is not this “ the Christ * ?” Such would have been the sentiments of his enemies, had their minds been as open to conviction. None will suspect the officers of the priests and elders of being partial in his favour; yet we know they returned to their masters with the following apology for not having seized him : “ Never man spake like this man †.” The manner in which he repelled the attempts to inveigle him, in difficult cases, both of politics and religion, inspired them, in spite of prejudice, with the most honour-

* Jo. iv. 29.

† Jo. vii. 46.

able sentiments: "They marvelled and left
 " him, and went their way *." With what
 dignity doth he appear, on many occasions,
 at once instructing and swaying the
 minds of the multitude, prepossessed against
 the humility, yet charmed or overawed by
 the majesty of his appearance? From this
 divine power over the heart, mixing with
 their imperfect views of his character, they
 would have made him a king, had he not
 gone from their presence.

To conclude: The character of Jesus
 as a teacher is crowned by his unspotted
 and exemplary life. Corrupt as the world
 may be, virtuous merit is deemed essential
 to the dignity of any public character. Even
 the prince who sits on the throne may expect
 reverence to his person only according to the
 opinion which is entertained of his virtue. The
 character of a public teacher is still more
 delicate. If he be a bad man, his instructions
 may be just, but they will be coldly received;
 nay, the finer

* Matth. xxii. 22.

they are, the more offensive and disgusting. The contrast is too strong; the discord even to an ordinary ear is ungrateful. As merit is necessary to support a public character, so the more shining it is, the influence will be the greater. Noble characters and actions displayed afford, to a well turned mind, not only the most pleasing entertainment, but by their influence it is also warmed and ripened, as generous fruits by the rays of the sun. What weight the doctrine of Jesus ought to have received from his life, is extremely obvious: A life distinguished by a variety of amiable and respectable virtues, such as create love, or esteem, or admiration. By the perfection of his personal character, he was qualified for the most unpleasing and unpopular parts; for reproofing and correcting, as well as instructing mankind. They were full of prejudices against him; yet, through their prejudices, the lustre of his life did often shine, and enlightened his doctrine. It has been affirmed with truth, that “his doctrine, in every practical part, “is an abstract of his life, and his life a “picture of these parts of his doctrine *.”

Y

* Dr Tillotson,

As to other parts professedly mysterious, or meaning of which is not obvious, the understandings of men ought to be biaſſed in their favour, not only by the dignity of the perſon who taught them, but as they proceeded from one who diſcovered, by his whole conduct, “that he
 “came not to do his own will, but the
 “will of him that ſent him *.” Diſinter-eſtedneſs has indeed been aſſumed by impoſtors, as an engine to amuſe or deceive; but ſooner or later the deceit is ſeen through. The prevalence and continuance of the deceit muſt be owing to ſome accidental cauſe, either to ignorance on one hand, or policy on the other. But as ſoon as men begin to uſe their reaſon, they ſee it, and throw it off with abhorrence. Nor can any one circumſtance be more enlightening, than the characters and lives of the authors. On this quarter, the religion of Jeſus has never been formally attacked, all attempts being juſtly looked upon as impracticable.

* John vi. 38.

S E C T. III.

Of his plain Discourses. Sermon on the Mount.

It has been already observed, that the doctrine of Jesus is for the most part simple, agreeably to the design of his appearance as the instructor and reformer of mankind. It is observable also, that his manner of discoursing is distinguished by the same mark, especially at the commencement of his public ministry. Afterwards indeed, when the prejudices of men began to operate, and an opposition was formed, the manner of delivering the doctrine became more complex. But he set out with the utmost plainness, and on the most popular and familiar subjects. This was treating his hearers both with fairness and kindness, considering the prejudices which had mingled with their expectation of the Messiah.

Two historians agree in acquainting us, that Jesus began his public ministry by discoursing on repentance, a subject familiar

miliar to the Jews in the prophetic age, and now renewed by the ministry of the Baptist. It is enough to say, that no subject could be more plain, or better suited to the commencement of his ministry.

IF one were inclined to select a single discourse distinguished by its plainness, the sermon on the mount would unquestionably deserve the preference *. It is the longest discourse which Jesus spake. It was directed against the prejudices of the hearers, who saw this, and were astonished. In every thing said, there is real design; yet it is said with the most graceful ease and simplicity.

THIS discourse was spoken to multitudes. Hence the plainness was fit, indeed necessary †. The bulk of men are

* See Matth. v. and vi. and vii. chapters.

† That it was addressed to the multitude of the disciples as well as to the apostles; that their joint instruction was intended through the whole discourse; are points which seem to require no laboured illustration; yet some writers have thought proper to dwell on the subject with great particularity. It is enough to observe, that the historian,

incapable of investigation, and are uneasy, if they be talked to with distance. They cannot endure to be held in suspense, especially when their passions are interested. The expectations of the multitude on this occasion were raised to a high pitch, by the appearance of Jesus, and by the fame of his miracles: They were in the same situation as when the Baptist made his first appearance. Jesus kindly relieved them, by discoursing with such fullness and plainness, that none could be at a loss to comprehend his meaning. In the early period of his ministry, and in some private interviews, he often spake with so much reserve, that the most learned of his disciples were puzzled and confounded. But now he was in a more advanced period, and had

before he enters into the discourse, informs his readers, that the multitude was assembled together from different places. This multitude is taken notice of at the end of the discourse: and to them the whole is extremely applicable. The twelve disciples, afterwards apostles, were perhaps at this time scarcely collected into a body. It is certain, that they had not received their apostleship.

begun to appear on the great stage of the world.

It has been, and still may be objected against the simplicity of this discourse, that some of the topics are too paradoxical, both as to the matter, and the manner of delivering them. The objection as to the matter, or subject of the discourse, when fairly stated, is an objection against the morals of Christianity, which are indeed in the literal sense paradoxical, being opposite to the opinions of men, which were corrupt, and an improvement on those which were just. Nor is there any thing in the manner or expression strictly paradoxical; if we candidly explain it by the same rules which we have no scruple of applying to discourses spoken in an age not less distant from our own, and spoken to persons not less remote in their manner and modes of expression. Hence we will see no impropriety in the bold touches which sound harshly to a modern ear, in the explication given of several precepts in the moral law *.

NOR is the order of this discourse less

* Matth. v. 29, 30.—37.—39, 40, 41.

plain than the matter of it. On the principles laid down in the beginning, the conclusions through the whole are established. The dispositions of the heart, the regularity of the outward conversation, the particular instances of duty required, the difficulties to be overcome, the errors and vices to be avoided, follow each other in an easy succession. Each member acquires strength from the following one, and gives fullness and beauty to the whole. Our attending to such a discourse is like the setting out at the source of a great river, observing how it increases and expands by every lesser stream, while we feel our own minds enlarged by the contemplation.

BUT the circumstance which compleats the excellency of this, as a plain discourse, is its suitableness to the times and persons for whose instruction it was delivered. This will be found to hold true, not only of the general scope of the discourse, but of every particular of which it consists.

IT was observed, that this discourse was spoken to multitudes. The historian informs us, that they were assembled from

different regions, from Syria and from beyond Jordan *. This multitude, therefore, has been considered as a representation of the world, Gentiles as well as Jews. Each had their peculiar prejudices and vices. Some prejudices and vices were common to both; and against all these did Jesus on this occasion testify.

THE manner in which the discourse is opened merits our particular attention, both as to the importance and propriety of the subject. The subject was no less than the chief good of man †; a subject, which had been long agitated by the wise men of antiquity, and about which they differed widely from one another.

If some placed happiness in virtue, others placed it in the enjoyment of pleasure, and in freedom from pain. This last it is natural to think would be better relished in the world than finer ones, against which the corruption or indolence of mankind must always rise in antipathy. The sublime

* Matth. v. 24. 25. † Matth. v. 1. 12.

philosophy of Plato was relished and understood only by a few. The rigorous philosophy of the Stoics had lost a great deal of its reputation, by the sufferings of some of its votaries, and suited ill with the loose manners which followed the great revolution in the empire of the world. The system of Epicurus, or rather the system of his followers, who placed the chief good in external pleasure, was more likely to have the vogue, and accordingly triumphed at this period.

THIS was the strong hold of which it was necessary the Gentile world should be dispossessed, before the religion of Jesus could make its entrance. Here, therefore, with great propriety, the attack was begun.

THE prejudices of the Jews in favour of a temporal Messiah formed an almost insurmountable obstacle to the spiritual religion of Jesus : This barrier it was also highly necessary to demolish. Great is the power of one ruling prejudice to corrupt the mind, and to give it a peculiar direction. If a triumphant Messiah was to the Jews the object of

national hope, it is easy to infer what a train of passions would issue from it. With these objects full in his eye, Jesus began to discourse to the multitude, and with infinite propriety. He doth not expose the folly of their prospects, nor show them how ill they were founded. He doth not even directly attack their pride, their arrogance, and all those passions with which it was natural to think such prospects would inspire them. Men are fond of their prejudices as of their offspring, and cannot bear to see others handle them roughly. Jesus satisfies himself, on this occasion, with directing their attention to a set of objects and pursuits diametrically opposite to the other: He points out the wrong way by instructing them in the right one; thus gently unfolding the sublime genius and happy tendency of his religion.

LEAVING out of the account Heathen philosophy and Jewish prejudices, the corruptions of the world in general, and the corrupt bias of human nature, made a testimony on this subject proper and necessary. Jesus was about to explain and in-

culcate the great duties of morality. With much fitness he lays the foundation in the dispositions of the heart. As happiness is the aim of all, so mistakes about it must be of the most fatal consequence. The removing of these mistakes we naturally expect to be the first and leading object in the eye of one appearing as the instructor of mankind *.

THE outward conversation of his disciples is the subject to which he next proceeds, and we expect it to follow the former; a good life issuing from a good heart as naturally and as easily as the stream from the fountain. On this subject we find him accommodating himself to the conceptions of men with the most graceful propriety. The world had been often told of the beauty, the fitness, and decorum of actions. They had been told, that virtue exhibited in life and manners was next to the Deity the loveliest of all objects. This sentiment, founded in human nature, and with which mankind were not unacquainted, he who knew what was in man takes hold of to convey to his disciples some idea of that man-

* Matth. v. 3.—12.

ner and behaviour which would adorn their own character, and recommend his religion to others. Greece had been called before this time the salt of the Nations, and wise men were called by the Jews the luminaries of the earth. Hence the following expressions to those who heard them spoken could be on no account unintelligible : “ Ye are the salt
“ of the earth, ye are the light of the
“ world *.”

AFTER this general account of the external behaviour, we naturally expect to find a detail of particular precepts. This subject necessarily introduced the Mosaic law: The ceremonial part of that law was near the term of its expiration, and the moral part stood in need of being improved or explained. Jesus on this account wisely chose to prevent the early prejudices against him, as if he intended to destroy the law and the prophets †. The judicial or civil law of the Jews, like that of any other society, could not

* Matth. v. 13. 14.

† Verse 17.

remain in force after the society itself was dissolved. To dissolve that society, or to dissolve any of their laws, was not the design of Jesus appearing in the world; but it was a consequence of his appearing. The Jewish polity had arrived at its period: A dissolution had been long threatened, and in a short time the threatening was renewed. The ceremonial law was given till the Messiah should come. It was given to typify and to keep alive the hope of that event. Of course his arrival fulfilled its design, in the same way, says Grotius, that laws made in time of war cease to operate as soon as peace is announced. The moral law was the only branch of their legislature which remained entire, and on this Jesus gives his opinion with much strength and precision.

• IT requires no great discernment to observe the suitableness and propriety of his doctrine on this head. The religion of the times was the religion of the Scribes and Pharisees * Among those persons, and in that age, the ceremonial parts of religion

* Matth. v. 19. 20.

were almost solely in vogue, at the expence of the moral part. In this last, they avowed the most dangerous principles: That men are punishable only for their actions, and not their intentions; that an observance of the strict letter of the law ought to be the only point of concern, was the doctrine almost universally believed by the people, and inculcated by their teachers. The Apostle Paul, who, before his conversion to christianity, had been a Pharisee, makes this confession *. Josephus, though polished by the learning and conversation of Rome, and no bigotted Pharisee, yet discovers on some occasions that these were his principles †. On this occasion Jesus points out the dangerous corruptions which they had introduced under the third, the sixth, and seventh precepts of the moral law; at the same time directing his disciples to a more sound and sublime morality ‡.

* Philip. iii.

† Thus he finds fault with Polybius for ascribing the death of the Emperor Antiochus to an intended act of sacrilege, though he did not really commit it.

‡ Matth. v. 11, — 27. 33.

THE judicial law of Moses, though well suited to the political constitution of the Jews, was not very favourable to an enlarged benevolence. It is evident also, that, in the application, they had sometimes exceeded the letter of the law, as well as the plain intention of the law-giver. Besides, the explaining of the law was at this time in the hands of the Scribes, and the standard by which they adjusted it was the traditions of the elders. In this situation stood the laws of retaliation and revenge, when Jesus appeared to correct and amend them *.

THE law of retaliation, in its most favourable aspect, has the air of being accommodated to the infancy of society. The necessity of it becomes less cogent, according as society increases in vigour. From the genius of the Jewish nation, we may safely conclude, that in every age they would grasp at the indulgence which this law allowed. But, in fact, the law was not made, except for the direction of the

* Matth. v. 38.

judge, as to the mode of punishing offenders. Private retaliation is never once specified or supposed. A law of indulgence on this subject would have been utterly incompatible with the happiness of society. The cases stated in this law of Moses clearly decide the question. One of the cases is, that of men striving, and hurting a woman with child, and mischief following *. The other case is, that of a false witness swearing before the judge, to the hurt of an innocent person, whom the judge is commanded to punish even "as he had thought to have done to his brother †". That the redressing the abuse of this law was clearly in the intention of Jesus, on this occasion, is abundantly obvious; though, with the whole system of judicial laws, it was near the term of its expiration. For this purpose he lays his commands on his disciples, to cultivate a spirit very different from what this law would inspire: not indeed such a passive spirit as some charge him with, on purpose to represent

* See Exodus ii. 22—25.

† See Deut. xix. 16—21.

his morals as impracticable ; but a spirit of flexibility in lesser matters, either of private wrong or inconvenience, which we would highly approve of in any person ; such as every person must approve of who is smitten with the charms of magnanimity, generosity, and sublime virtue *.

In the whole law of Moses we find no statute commanding the Israelites to hate their enemies. Yet Jesus, when about to give his opinion on the subject, expressly declares, “ Ye have heard that it hath
“ been said, Thou shalt love thy neigh-
“ bour, and hate thine enemy †.” We easily know where to find the first clause of this injunction, but the source of the latter is not quite so obvious. Some critics go no farther back in their search, than the traditions of the elders, or of the Scribes and Pharisees. Others have ob-

* Matth. v. 39. Strike, but hear me, said Lycurgus to the fellow aiming a blow at his face.

PLUT.

† Math. v. 43.

A a

served, that though in the law of Moses there is not precisely such a statute; yet it is the spirit of these laws by which the Jews were commanded, under severe penalties, to detach themselves from every other nation. Providence had great schemes to accomplish, some nearer, others more remote: At the same time national distance, or such enmity as takes place among nations at war was all that could possibly be intended by these laws. This is stating the matter in its strongest light; yet among public enemies, personal enmity, far less a peevish enmity, is not necessarily supposed; nay, humanity, generosity, and every splendid act of benevolence have full room to operate. The peevishness and malevolence of the Jews are taken notice of, both by the poets and historians of antiquity *. This national temper Jesus with much propriety exposes and corrects in the parable of the wound-

* Non monstrare viam eadem nisi sacra colenti.

JUVENAL.

Apud ipsos fides obstinata. misericordia in promptu:

Adversos omnes alios hostile odium. TACITUS.

ed traveller relieved by the Samaritan *. It was on purpose to pull it up by the root that he introduces this new command †: “ I say unto you, love your enemies ;” a command reasonable in itself, and which was about to be recommended by his own example. This was in effect doing no more than bringing the matter back to the same ground on which the law of nature had put it. The ends served by the ancient law of separation were now accomplished. The great society of mankind, whom God made of one blood, were about to be cemented by the milder dispensation of the gospel.

PREJUDICES in favour of ancient laws or customs take fast hold of the mind ; even errors and absurdities become venerable by their antiquity. With removing these Jesus very properly began, before he proceeded to the examination of other errors which modern custom had introduced, and which had fashion on their side ‡.

* Matth v 44.

† This parable was spoken on occasion of a lawyer asking him, Who is my neighbour ? Luke x. 29.

‡ To preserve the Jews from idolatry was the im-

THE errors of this last kind were on subjects of great importance in morality, devotion, and charity*. These errors took rise from the ostentation and hypocrisy of a few; they were specious and popular, and soon adopted by the many: At the same time, they were errors respecting not so much the matter of the duties, as the manner of performing them. It is very observable, concerning devotion and almsgiving, that though two of the most essential duties of religion, more delicacy of manner is necessary, than in discharging the ordinary duties of life. Honesty and justice,

mediate object of the laws of separation. They were taught by precept, and by a severe discipline, to abhor idolatry, consequently idolaters. The most eminent and approved characters are distinguished by high degrees of this abhorrence, of which David is a remarkable instance. The gospel brings all to the knowledge and worship of the true God; hence the cause of the enmity was abolished. The Jews were commanded by this law to show mercy to their enemies; but it appears from the cases specified, that these enemies were brethren or neighbours, not persons of another nation. Exod. xxiii. 4. Deut. xxii. 1. Deut. xx. 10.

* Matth. vi. 1.—18.

in what way soever displayed, cannot be the objects of censure or ridicule; but the former may. On these momentous points of devotion and charity, we see Jesus taking measures to secure his morals against the obloquy of the world. There is a simplicity and a majesty in his instructions on the subject, compared with which the fine sayings of philosophers must appear to be greatly defective.

HAVING warned his disciples against errors in practice which were respected for their antiquity, or complied with from fashion, he proceeds next to warn them against vices pernicious in their own nature, and also prejudicial to his religion, by hindering others from receiving it. These vices are a worldly spirit *, and an hypocritical severity in religion †.

How far the first of these would dispose men for his religion, even produce an aversion to it, is extremely obvious. A

* Matth. vi. 19 —33.

† Matth. xvii. 1.—5.

religion wholly spir' tual in its nature and views, promising no temporal advantages to its votaries, was likely to be ill received by men possessed by a worldly spirit, and full of worldly hopes. Jesus foresaw this evil ; and therefore with much wisdom remedies it at the source. For this purpose, it was proper to spiritualize the views of his disciples, and expose to them the absurdity of their attachments, in order to their being tully determined “ to “ seek the kingdom of God, and the “ righteousness thereof *.”

NEXT to this, an hypocritical severity would also prove an obstacle to the success of his religion. The age abounded with persons of that character, and Jesus himself was often the subject of their censure. Great severity to others was, in the eyes of the Jews, a specious virtue. The disciples of Jesus might also be in danger of falling into the deceit. Hence they might do hurt to his religion, and deter

* Matth. vi. 33.

others from embracing it, who were of less gloomy minds. A censorious severity is unpleasant in a religious character, could we suppose the two compatible. But an hypocritical severity is odious, and has the effect of rendering not only the persons but their opinions detestable. Even an honest plainness may have the unhappy effect of hurting the man who displays it, and the cause in which he is engaged. This last is called “ giving things that are holy to dogs, and casting pearls before swine *.”

FROM attending either to the genius of the religion of Jesus, to the spirit of the times in which it was published, or to the propensities of human nature, we need not be surprised if it was received with some reluctance, and if considerable difficulties attended the profession of it. All this Jesus foresaw, and provided for the event. He calls upon his disciples to exert their best endeavours ; he introduces his command to do this by the indulgent promise

* Matth. vii. 6.

of divine aid, which he requires them to ask; and kindly warns them of the dangers they would be liable to in embracing his religion, from their own indolence, or from the hypocrisy and deceiving influence of others *.

THE manner of concluding this discourse is very observable. Jesus well foresaw, that, among his disciples, there might be some who would satisfy themselves merely with the profession of his religion, or perhaps would put it on as a cloak to cover their vices. He therefore, with much propriety, provides against this evil by giving an open testimony on the subject. †

He also strengthens his religion on the quarter where it has been most exposed to an attack, the lives of its professors. To suppose that any doctrines should have the same degree of influence on all who receive them, is supposing what never yet happened, and what is absurd to suppose can happen without a miracle. Men are dealt with as reasonable creatures. They are put in

* Matth. v. 46 — Ch. vii. 6. 32.

† Matth. vii. 21.—23.

the proper tract of conduct, and are encouraged to pursue it. The wisdom of doing so is set before them, and the folly of the contrary. This is the obvious meaning of the significant address with which Jesus concludes his discourse.

“ Therefore, whosoever heareth these say-
 “ ings of mine, and doth them, I will liken
 “ him unto a wise man which built his
 “ house upon a rock: And the rain descend-
 “ ed, and the floods came, and the wind
 “ blew, and beat upon that house, and it
 “ fell not, for it was founded upon a rock.
 “ And every one that heareth these say-
 “ ings of mine, and doth them not, shall
 “ be likened unto a foolish man which
 “ built his house upon the sand; and the
 “ rain descended, and the floods came, and
 “ the winds blew, and beat upon that
 “ house, and it fell; and great was the fall
 “ of it *.”

* Matth. vii. 24.—29.

S E C T. IV.

Of his Parables.

WE have seen in the former section, that Jesus began his public ministry by discoursing on plain subjects, and discoursing on them with simplicity. But, in the progress of his ministry, he found it proper to enter on more intricate subjects, or to make a more particular application of what he had formerly taught. We expect that his manner of teaching should change, both from the nature of the subjects, and from the growing prejudices of the world against him. This is the general account why Jesus, whose manner of teaching was at first so simple, proceeded afterwards to speak by parables to the multitudes; inasmuch that one of the historians observes, That “in parables he spake the word to them, “as they were able to hear it, and that

“ without a parable spake he not unto
 “ them *.”

THE world was not unacquainted with this manner of conveying instruction. It took its rise from the corruptions of men, and occurred as a proper expedient for dealing with their corruptions. Sober reason is at all times easy to deal with ; but where passion or prejudice agitate the mind, the reducing of it cannot fail to be an intricate operation. Thus also, in the more simple state of society, the method of dealing with men is plain and easy ; but as soon as society becomes complex, when laws, or customs, or manners are formed, and when subordinations among men are established, the ordinary avenue to the mind is blocked up, and ingenuity must be set at work in finding out new ones.

OUR knowledge of the history of the world, and of particular societies, confirms

* Mark iv. 33 34 It has been observed, that this change in the manner of teaching was not introduced till after what chronologists call Christ's second passover, when, by his doctrine and miracles, the sparks of malice were kindled in the breasts of his enemies.

this observation. By the light of sacred history, we find that the intercourse of mens thoughts was carried on in the most simple form during the infancy of society. In process of time, when monarchies began to be almost universally established, when power, by a sort of voluntary concert in almost every nation, was devolved upon one, the language of men must have necessarily taken a new turn, different a good deal from the original simplicity of nature: Even the persons who did not mean to flatter, but to convey wholesome counsel, would be under the necessity of avoiding offence, and of giving their counsels a grateful relish, by the refined manner of dispensing them. Hence it is easy to see how, among people of warm fancy and of slavish principles, the refined methods of discourse would grow into reputation, and would be applied in all cases of the most serious nature, where it was of importance to instruct men, and at the same time to avoid offending them by the instruction.

THIS appears to have been the progress of discourse in the Eastern world, as far as we have any history to guide us. In scripture, the patriarchal stile is wonderfully simple, though not destitute of sublimity. We know also, that, while the Jews were under the government of their lawgiver and his successor, they were spoken to plainly and roundly on all occasions ; and the same plainness of speech was the characteristick of the people. But as soon as they got a king, though only a nominal one *, we find the disguised forms of speech beginning to appear among them.

THE parable of Jotham to the men of Sichem, is the first of this kind we meet with †. The parable of Nathan ‡, and the parable of the woman of Tekoah ||, both addressed to King David, shew what progress this species of discourse had made, which entered also, tho' not precisely in this form, into the compositions of that prince and of his successor. In this form the Jewish prophets often delivered their un-

* Abimelech † Judges ix. 8.

‡ 2 Samuel xii. 1.

|| 2 Sam. xiv. 4. -

pleasant messages to the people. The manner of instructing by parables was therefore neither new nor unknown to the Jews; and the reasons for the use of it at this time were equally, if not a great deal more, pressing than ever. Nor was it new to the world in general. From the Eastern nations it had passed into Greece, where it was in high reputation, and by that channel into Rome, then the seat of learning and empire *.

A parable may be founded either on a true story, or on a probable one, or on one wholly fictitious. The most ancient parables were of this latter sort; such as the parable of Jotham, where trees are introduced speaking: Such also were the Greek and Roman fables, where birds and beasts are made to converse, and thereby to convey advice to mankind. Of the former kinds are the parables of Nathan, of

* The general idea of this species of composition is thus expressed by one, who excelled in it himself:

“ Servitus obnoxia, quia quod volebat non audebat dicere, affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit, calumniamque fœlis elusit jocis.” PHOEDRUS, introd. ad Fab.

the woman of Tekoah, of the prophets, and of Jesus Christ *.

I have been more particular in this detail than perhaps may be thought necessary ; but the use of it to our present purpose is very important : It may fully satisfy all who require to be satisfied, that Jesus, by teaching in parables, did not deal unfairly with the world, but in the very same way in which they had been dealt with often, and by persons who could not fall under the suspicion of carrying on interested designs. Obscurity indeed is apt to create suspicion, and men generally dislike to be confounded or perplexed : But then

* In one view, the epic poem of the ancients may be ranged in this class. It was always founded on a true story, or a probable one. Human characters and actions were drawn at full length, not merely for amusement, but for instruction. The epic poets may be looked upon as the refined preachers of morality in the Pagan world. Without directly lashing the vices of men, as the satyrists afterwards did, they chose rather to hold out their compositions as a sort of mirror, in which men might see their faults by reflection, and be prompted to amend them.

every particular is to be taken into the account, whether the obscurity is universal, without any light attending or preceding it; whether it is balanced by the character of the person speaking; and whether or not there is occasion for it, from the circumstances of the persons addressed, who perhaps must be talked to with reserve, or not at all. Such manners in ordinary life are not offensive; they please every person of good taste by their propriety. In a person of a public character, they are not only beautiful, but necessary, when at all adventures men must be dealt with, and when it is of importance to sway them contrary to their prevailing bias and humour.

It is to be observed, that the parables of Jesus were spoken to multitudes. The subjects of the parables were often intricate and mysterious. It will be more particularly observed in its place, that some of the parables refer to events which were soon to happen, the nature and meaning of which the multitude could not possibly comprehend till they saw the accomplish-

ment; while others refer to events in which they were too nearly interested to see them in their fullest light, and yet not to be hurt by the discovery. For instance, the establishment of the spiritual religion of Jesus in the world, the opposition of the Jews, and the final rejection of that people, were truths too strong to be clearly unfolded at once. These and some others were the mysteries of his kingdom, which the multitude could not comprehend, and for which they were not ripened. On these subjects he was more plain with his own apostles; yet to them all was darkness and intricacy. We may therefore conclude, that on some occasions of teaching by parables, Jesus acted from compassion to the infirmity of his hearers, when their importunity would have almost forced from him a fuller discovery of the truth. "We can never do more injury to truth," says a noble author, "than by discovering too much of it on some occasions. 'Tis the same with understandings as with eyes. To such of a certain size and make, just so much light is necessary and no more. Whatever is beyond that,

“ brings darkness and confusion. ’Tis
 “ real humanity and kindness to hide
 “ strong truths from tender eyes, and to
 “ do this by a pleasant amusement, is
 “ easier and civilier, than by a harsh de-
 “ nial or remarkable reserve.” I shall
 only add, that to the multitudes Jesus had
 already discoursed in an undisguised
 manner, on subjects plain in their meaning,
 and of the greatest consequence for them
 to be acquainted with.

His teaching by parables must appear
 both reasonable and proper, when we re-
 flect that he had to deal not only with the
 weakness of the multitude, but with their
 prejudices and passions. What these were,
 is easy to be collected from this history.
 The expectation of a temporal Messiah was
 the ruling passion of the times, and this in
 its train carried a great many bad ones.
 The effect was such as we may look for :
 As soon as Jesus appeared, his country-
 men were offended with the humility of
 his aspect. Under this disadvantage, it was
 his task to propose unwelcome truths, and
 to attempt the dispossessing of their fa-

vourite prejudices. Sentiments which are too refined for vulgar apprehension, which attack their prejudices, or touch their vices, must be conveyed in such a manner as to appear respectable. Reserve becomes as necessary then, as the greatest plainness of speech on other occasions. Here then Jesus acted with the same propriety of conduct which he requires of his disciples, “not to give that which is holy “to dogs, neither to cast their pearls “before swine *.” Besides this, it is to be remembered, that he instructed men, that so he might reform them; and when men are to be reformed, one point is gained, if they can be spoken to without giving offence. If, for instance, there were persons to whom Jesus often discoursed, who looked upon themselves, or their narrow society,

* Matth vii 6 In this maxim, he is not singular. The wise of antiquity proceeded on it, in training up their disciples; and their natural good sense seem to have dictated it. The sublimer points of doctrine they explained only to advanced scholars, who had been for some time in the habit of purifying their passions.

as the favourites of Heaven, to the exclusion of all others ; if these same persons were a proud, revengeful, worldly-minded generation, it is obvious with what delicacy it was fit that he should proceed so as to avoid offending in order to gain them, and at the same time to maintain the dignity of his instructions. That these persons were not reformed, ought, according to every rule of justice and good sense, to be stated to their own account : “ They had eyes, but
 “ saw not ; ears, but heard not ; neither
 “ did they understand ”

This leads me to observe another reason why Jesus taught by parables. It is this : The more plain methods of instruction had produced very little effect. We are indeed told of impressions made by these to his advantage. But we are obliged to regret, that for the most part the impressions were only temporary : Hence, in his very first parable, some disciples are compared to seed sown on the way side, on rocks, or among thorns *. This levity on their part, when Jesus had

* Matth. xiii. 4.—7.

been so plainly and so kindly instructing them, was beyond all doubt highly criminal; and therefore the change of his manner from the familiar to the distant, must not be matter of surprize: We would expect the like treatment from our best friend, if we abused his intimacy.

As some persons were chargeable with levity; so neglect and even enmity were the more grievous crimes of others. To have continued discoursing to such persons with an affectionate simplicity, was a favour to which they had no title. It could have only served the purpose of inflaming their pride, and of rivetting their opposition. To discontinue the instructing them, would have been incompatible with his public character: Without giving them up, he chose to punish them, by the distance of his manner and discourse. Such conduct was proper for maintaining the respect which was due to his doctrine. Obscure hints, and doubtful meanings severely exercise the mind, especially if they proceed from a person whose resentment we are conscious to have deserved.

This treatment the enemies of Jesus justly merited on the foundation of a maxim, the reasonableness of which probably they allowed, because he so often alludes to it, and even applies it to the present case : “ Whosoever hath,” who improves what he hath, “ to him shall be given, and “ he shall have more abundance : But who-
 “ soever hath not, from him shall be taken
 “ even that which he hath ? Therefore
 “ speak I unto them in parables *.” The generation of men who lived in the times of the prophets resembled this generation in their manners, and had been thus dealt with. They had despised their own law, which, in the most plain terms, told them their duty ; in consequence of this, the prophets were commanded to speak to them in judgement, with mysterious yet awful meaning : “ Go tell this
 “ people,” says God to his prophet, “ Hear
 “ ye indeed, but understand not ; and see
 “ ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the
 “ heart of this people fat ; and make their
 “ ears heavy, and shut their eyes : lest
 “ they see with their eyes, and hear with
 “ their ears, and understand with their

* Matth. xiii. 12. 13.

“ hearts, and convert and be healed * ;” an irony as emphatical and piercing as ever was uttered.

BUT it ought also to be observed, that when Jesus spake in parables, it was a point not only of propriety, but often of necessity ; and this necessity sprang from the insidiousness and virulence of his enemies. Often they assembled together, “ to catch him in his talk, that they might “ have something whereof to accuse him.” For this purpose they sought him out in his privacy, or mixed with the crowd. Plainness with such persons would have been a perilous method of dealing: Reserve was the safe and allowable expedient. If men cannot speak with freedom where their silence would be criminal, they must endeavour to fall on some way in which they can do it with safety ; and must increase the reserve in proportion to the danger. There is nothing in such conduct unfair or improper, inconsistent either with integrity or dignity of beha-

* Isaiah vi. 9 10

viour. The enemies of Jesus saw the propriety of his conduct, perhaps they admired it; but it galled instead of reforming them, and excited their malice and subtlety more keenly than ever. This was remarkably the case, on occasion of Jesus speaking the parable of the vineyard let out to husbandmen: “The chief priests
 “and the scribes, the same hour sought
 “to lay hands on him; and they feared
 “the people; for they perceived he had
 “spoken this parable against them. And
 “they watched him, and sent forth spies,
 “which should feign themselves just men,
 “that they might take hold of his words,
 “that so they might deliver him into the
 “power and authority of the governor *.” Thus surrounded with enemies on all hands, who used every artifice to ensnare him, to what expedient could he have recourse more proper than the present? An expedient not suggested by weakness or unmanly fear, but on all occasions applied with the most perfect dignity, and suggested by a just regard for the success of his labours.

* Luke xx, 19. 20.

WHEN treating of the parables of Jesus, one cannot avoid observing the agreeable variety which is thereby introduced into his public discourses. This is a circumstance of greater merit than perhaps we apprehend: for as mens stomachs, especially if they are squeamish, loath their ordinary food, and seek nicer fare; so the mind is apt to tire by a constant attention to the same objects. This is the case in the most vigorous state of the mind: But if it be languid and diseased from whatever cause, some relief is a point of absolute necessity. The objects of attention must be changed, or must be placed in some different point of view. From attending to the dispositions of the persons whom Jesus taught, we may naturally conclude, that they would soon grow weary of his plain discourses, and be in the humour of relishing a more refined manner. After his long discourse of the former kind *, we are told, that the multitudes were astonished at his

* Sermon on the mount.

doctrine. But it is of the nature of astonishment, not to be of long continuance. Besides this, to be told plainly of their vices and follies, to have their duty powerfully and repeatedly pressed upon them, without any relief from a different manner of instructing, must have created disgust in some, and have blunted the appetite of others. Of the relief which this variety must have given the hearers, perhaps we may form some judgment from observing the manner in which we are affected by reading them.

BUT there is something in the nature of parable which peculiarly excites and commands attention. It has this effect, by the manner of its application. It addresses itself principally to the fancy, a faculty of easiest access, and by her assistance insinuates the truth into the understanding and affections. Ordinary men, as has been observed, are apt to grow weary of the best instructions plainly and frequently repeated. Perhaps they will not give themselves the trouble to weigh the power of an argument, or their affections may not

be warm enough to receive any deep impression. The understanding may be perplexed, and the affections may be cold, but the imagination is accessible at all times; having also this prerogative, as an intermediate faculty, that she can impart light to the one, and warmth to the other. She is capable indeed of misleading us in the search of truth, for want of a proper direction, and of carrying us beyond it into all the wildness of enthusiasm: But when properly directed, she gives a clearness to the understanding, and a vigour to the affections, which, without her assistance, they never could have experienced.

S E C T. V.

The same Subject continued.

WHEN treating of the parables of Jesus, it would be unpardonable to overlook the propriety with which they were conducted, as to their moral application and

the occasions of using them. This shall be attempted, after premising an observation or two, in order to prevent mistakes, and to throw light on this subject.

It is to be observed, in the first place, that some of the discourses to which the sacred writers give the name of parables, are not so, in the stricter sense of the word: They are rather proverbs or wise sayings *, which come as near as possible to the truth meant to be proposed, without expressly declaring it. A parable, in the strict sense is a species of discourse going beyond the truth, not against it; overshooting the mark, and striking by rebound †: For this reason it must be bolder and more elevated than the former. But as the aim of each is the same, the sacred historian acted with entire propriety in making all the discourses of this kind to pass under one general denomination. A distinction was the less necessary, as by far the greater part of his parables are such in the strictest sense. At the same time the

* παροιμιαι. † παραβολαι.

distinction is observable: For instance, the story of the rich man and the beggar is without doubt a parable. But what is asserted in another place on the subject of purity can scarcely fall under this precise notion *.

It is next to be observed, that, according to the account already given of the parables of Jesus, their objects must have been various; such as the conveying either of instruction or reproof, the correcting of errors or preventing them; the instructing men in the knowledge of truths which could be viewed with advantage only at a distance; or of others which would have started them when plainly proposed. There were errors and vices of different kinds, against which it was proper that Jesus, as a divine teacher, should testify; and which it was necessary to correct in some measure, before his religion could be received. There were truths also necessary to be conveyed, respecting the establishment of his religion, and respecting the conduct of

* Matth. xv. 11. 12.

his disciples on occasion of that event. These were subjects which required to be touched with a delicate hand, and each of them we see conducted with the highest grace and propriety.

It appears from the gospel-history, that a worldly spirit was one peculiar characteristic of the persons to whom Jesus discoursed. This spirit was cherished by the delusive hopes of a temporal Messiah. The people and rulers of the Jews, the multitudes, and even the chosen disciples, felt its influence; an influence which must have proved fatal to the success of a spiritual religion, had Jesus used no efforts to counterwork it. Here it is beautiful to observe the propriety and decorum with which he proceeds. The Pharisees, who always opposed him, were remarkably possessed of this spirit, and covered it with the cloak of an extraordinary sanctity: "They devoured widows houses, and for a shew made long prayers *." Their hypocrisy in this instance he reserves to be the subject of grave censure, and in the

* Luke xx. 47.

mean time satisfies himself with attacking their covetousness : He describes them only in feigned characters : He casts a veil on their deformities : To have done otherwise might have had the effect, either of irritating their minds against all further instruction, or of throwing an air of ridicule on the venerable character to which they made a pretence. In the parables which have this vice, and probably this very sect, for their object, the personages introduced, whether feigned or real, are not of the religious kind: They are such as we would call men of the world by profession, who gave themselves no trouble about religion, yet hoped to be saved as the descendants of Abraham. Of this kind are the parables of the rich man whose ground brought forth plentifully, spoken on purpose to shew the folly of covetousness *; of the unjust steward, to shew the proper use of wealth †; and of the rich man and the beggar, to shew the danger of abusing it ‡. The decorum observed in the last of these parables is the more remarkable, that

* Luke xii. 13. † Luke xvi. 1. ‡ Luke xvi. 19.

it was delivered not only in the hearing of the Pharisees, but immediately after they had derided him, and his instructions on this subject *.

HYPOCRISY was a reigning vice among the Jews, and especially among the Pharisees, to whom a great number of the parables are addressed. It is one of the vices which must highly discredit any religion, and none could more effectually obstruct the progress of a religion founded on truth. On every account it was worthy of Jesus to give a testimony against this vice: We find him giving one at great length towards the conclusion of his ministry. In an earlier period, the presumption of the Pharisees exposed one species of hypocrisy to his censure; I mean their scrupulousness on the subject of external purity, to the prejudice of that purity which is real and internal †. They censured his disciples for “transgressing the traditions of the elders, by eating meat with unwashen hands.” In attacking this hypocritical prejudice, it is easy to see, that much delicacy was requi-

* Luke xvi. 1.—14.

† Matth. xv. 1: 2.

red. External purity had the sanction of divine laws and antiquity on its side. It was agreeable to the genius of the people, and had all the weight of a national usage. From attacking them openly and directly on this quarter, there was small probability of success. He therefore attacks them on another, quite weak and defenceless, the transgressing of the divine commands by their traditions. Here, with the utmost propriety, he introduces their own prophets condemning them as a hypocritical people *; After which he proceeds to lay open the absurdity of their scruples, in the following short parable addressed to the multitude: “Not that
 “which goeth into the mouth defileth a
 “man: but that which cometh out of the
 “mouth, that defileth a man †.”

ANOTHER characteristic of the times was a selfish spirit issuing from pride, or greatly fomented by it; the character of the Pharisees, and in some degree of the whole nation of the Jews: “They
 “trusted in themselves that they were
 “righteous, and despised others.”

* Matth. xv. 8. 9. see Isa. xxix. 13.

† Matth. xv. 10.

THE Pharisees valued themselves on their rigorous observance of the ceremonial parts of religion; the Jews, on their privileges as the descendants of Abraham. The former looked down with contempt on every other sect: The latter despised, and even hated, every other nation. The religion of Jesus breathed goodwill to the whole society of mankind. It declared war only against the malevolent affections. Hence, it is easy to see, that a spirit of selfishness must have uniformly opposed its success; and that to bear down this spirit, must have been a difficult task. Enmities, the causes of which cannot be easily assigned, which are rivetted by custom, or which humour our natural biases, are of all others the most difficult to be conquered. They are like old sores in the natural body, which have baffled ordinary cures, and with which new ones must be tried, such as may sweeten the blood, and alter the constitution.

THE selfish temper of the Pharisees was precisely of this kind, and it required much skill to correct it. The period was fast approaching, when not only

the selfishness of these persons, but their malevolence and bigotry, would be furnished with occasions of displaying themselves. As the calling of the Gentiles was an object which, even viewed at a distance, would give their jealousies the alarm, Jesus, with great propriety, conveys the wholesome reproof in parable. In this light the following parables may be viewed: Of the Pharisee and publican praying in the temple; of the two sons commanded to work in the vineyard; of the labourers called early, and at the last hour; of the guest who chose the highest seat at the table; of the lost sheep; of the lost money; of the man and his two sons, one a prodigal; of the good Samaritan. In several of these parables, the comparative merit of the Jewish and Gentile world is justly, though faintly stated, on purpose to humble the pride of the one, and to exalt the humble hopes of the other.

It has been observed, that Jesus applied his parables to the purposes both of reproof and instruction. It has been also observed, that some of them are peculiar-

ly directed to the Jews, and others of them to the society of his own disciples.

THE Jews, who stand distinguished in history by their privileges, are no less distinguished by their abusing them. Of their guilt and danger, they were often told by their prophets. But their guilt was now enhanced, the cup of their iniquity was filled up, by rejecting the Messiah. A warning on this subject required delicacy in the execution, in order to secure the least probability of success. The prophets, on such subjects, were often obliged to speak in a disguised stile. The propriety of Jesus speaking in this stile was much greater, from their known prejudices against himself and his doctrine. No expedient could have given their ingenuity a fairer trial, than the instructions contained in the parables of the barren fig-tree *, of the rebellious husbandmen in the vineyard †, and of the persons invited to the marriage supper, who refused to come ‡. The two last of which parables contained a truth, which at the first proposal was fit to be only faintly expressed, the total rejection of the Jews, and the calling of the Gentiles.

* Luke xiii. 6. † Matth xxi. 33. ‡ Matth. xxii. 1.

THE obstinacy and disingenuity of the Jews were proof against this delicate mode of instruction. It was unnecessary to continue it long; and the circumstances of the disciples of Jesus, either of those who had embraced his religion, or of those who might afterwards embrace it, made it expedient that instructions on many interesting points should be conveyed to them also in the language of reserve: For instance, offences were soon to arise against this religion; it was of importance, that its professors should be told of these before hand, and told in a way the least offensive and alarming.

THE almost universal opposition of the Jews, was probably one of the most dangerous stumbling-blocks in the way of receiving the gospel. Have any of the rulers believed in him? might not the multitude object? Can this stone, which the builders despised, be indeed the head of the corner? The objection, in case they took hold of it, was plausible and specious. Can this Jesus be the Messiah, might not many others say, whom

his own nation rejected? Can or ought a religion to be well received in latter times of the world, when the persons to whom it was first published thought it discreditable to embrace it? Jesus, who foresaw, provided against the difficulty, by informing his disciples, that all this was to happen. Though it was unnecessary to be explicit, there was much reason for saying it with reserve, to avoid irritating his enemies, whose characters and opposition were to be described; and, at the same time, for saying it with such meaning, that out of their own mouth their opposition might stand condemned. They were the husbandmen in the parable of the vineyard *; and the following is the sentence which they unwarily pass on themselves: “He,” *i. e.* the Lord of the vineyard, “will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard to other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their season †.”

ANOTHER offence against the religion of Jesus was likely to arise from the weakness, or the wickedness of some who pro-

* Matth. xxi. 33.

† Matth. xxi. 41.

fessed it. The purer any society is, or professes to be, the vices of that society must be the more observeable; as a spot in a white garment, or as a lowering cloud, when the face of the heavens is serene. The church of Christ was to be collected out of the common mass of mankind. Some would enter into it from levity, hypocrisy, or from mere warmth of temper, who, by their vices, or by their defection, might bring it into disrepute. In the eye of reason, good principles are not one whit the worse, because bad men happen to espouse them: yet, in fact, a connection is instantly formed, to the disadvantage of the whole system of principles on that very account; and this connection, when once formed, the bulk of men cannot easily break. Jesus foresaw this consequence, and provided against it. For this reason, he describes the larger society of his disciples, as containing a mixture of good and bad. This truth was highly proper to be insinuated, before the event should produce the unpleasant information, and insinuated with reserve, lest the weak should be

offended, and lest the insincere should avail themselves of a fuller discovery. All this is finely executed in the parables of the sower *, of the tares and wheat in the same field †, and of the net which caught in it all kinds of fishes ‡. It is observeable, that these are the earliest parables of Jesus, and that he chose to begin the parabolical manner of teaching by instructions on this subject.

AGAINST the religion of Jesus, offence would also arise from its unpromising beginnings: It was espoused and supported at first by few; and only by persons whose countenance could contribute very little to its establishment in the world. This circumstance was no doubt matter of triumph to its enemies, and yielded to its votaries a melancholy prospect. It was of importance to give a check to the insolence of the one, and to the despondency of the other. For this purpose, Jesus unfolds the extent of his religion, but with a reserve of manner corresponding to the seeming improbability of the event; such as would least hurt the rea-

* Matth. xiii. 3.

† v. 24.

‡ v. 47.

son of men, and such as would secure the discovery from derision. His talking on this subject parabolically, has not only a striking propriety, but the subject seems absolutely to require it. An extraordinary event is not the more credible, because it is strongly and peremptorily asserted. If it be represented as agreeable to what happens in the ordinary course of nature, it will gain more upon our assent, than if it was affirmed with the assuming tone of demonstration. That the religion of Jesus, feeble in its beginnings, should, in its progress, become flourishing, was an almost incredible discovery. He, therefore, with much propriety, clothes it in the following parables: Of the seed in the field growing up and ripening, independently of the attention of the sower *; of the grain of mustard-seed growing up to a large tree †; of the leaven which was hid in the meal, till the whole was leavened ‡.

* Matth. iv.—26.

† Matth. xiii. 31.

‡ Vers. 33.

BUT there were other subjects of instruction besides these, which required to be treated parabolically ; at least, the propriety of treating them in this manner, is obvious and evident.

THE excellency of the religion of Jesus is one of these subjects. To persons immersed in sensible pursuits, a religion spiritual and refined could have but few attractions. A worldly spirit, formed on delusive prospects, was one characteristic of the persons to whom it was proposed. It was therefore proper to clothe the subject in a dress suited to their taste. To have told them simply that this religion was excellent in its nature, and valuable on its own account, would have been but a feeble recommendation. Jesus therefore compares it to treasures * and pearls †, which men are willing to purchase at a great rate, even sometimes at the expence of their lives.

THE mortifications which were unavoidable upon embracing the religion of Jesus, and the calm resolution with which it was

* Matth. xiii 44.

† Ver. 45.

necessary to embrace it, were subjects also fit to be talked of in parables. They were unquestionably, to the hearers, unpleasant subjects. On such occasions, it is not unfair to amuse the imaginations of men, while their reason is addressed. It was a delicate task to recommend the discipline of serious reflection to persons engaged often in disputes about secular grandeur and pre-eminencies. It could not be introduced more properly, than in the familiar and spirited style of the two following parables; of the man building the tower, and sitting down to count the cost; and of the king going out to war, after balancing his own strength with that of his adversary *.

As some severities were unavoidable, so others were wholly unnecessary, and might have the effect of doing more harm than good. Fasting, for instance, was, among the Jews, a popular and specious exercise. The Pharisees fasted twice in the week, and the disciples of John fasted often. The disciples of Jesus were censured for their non-compliance with these austerities, and for the support which they received

* Luke xiv. 28. 31.

from the example of their master. Jesus defends their conduct ; but the popularity of these austerities made the proceeding on his part extremely delicate. Instead of a direct defence, he therefore appeals to their own sense of propriety, in support of his sentiments, in the following parables. “ No man putteth a piece of “ new cloth into an old garment. No “ man putteth new wine into old bottles*.” Directed by this sense of propriety, the ancient philosophers proceeded in treating their young pupils. Lesser degrees of proficiency were required of them, than of others. Allowance was made for the feebleness of their minds, and for the careless manner of life to which they had been habituated. From lessons of the easy kind, they passed on to the higher lessons of self-denial and self-government, which were justly deemed essential to the perfection of a virtuous character.

THE second coming of Jesus, and the preparation necessary for that event, are

* Matth. ix. 16. 17.

also subjects which Jesus treats of in parable. By a peculiar felicity, his instructions on this subject are equally adapted to the circumstances of those to whom they were spoken, and of all his disciples; to the catastrophe of Jerusalem, and to the day of a general judgement. Events so important and decisive could not be too deeply engraved on the minds of men, nor could the impression be attempted more properly than by a parable. To have told the Jews simply, that their city and nation were about to be dissolved; to have talked to the world about the general judgement, as of a truth which they ought to believe, would have been a manner of proceeding too feeble to determine their sentiments or conduct. They are therefore, on some occasions, delineated in their most striking circumstances *. To rouse the imagination on the subject; to make such interesting events in some sort the objects of sense, was the manner of effecting these ends with the greatest probability of success.

* Matth. xxiv. chap. passim.

WHAT could with greater force, or in more glowing colours, describe the awful solemnity of a future judgement, than the nuptial ceremony performed among the Easterns at midnight by the light of torches and lamps? Or the posture of preparation for it, than the going forth of the virgins, to meet the bridegroom with their lamps in their hands? Or the misery of those who are wholly unprepared, than the situation of the foolish virgins who had no oil with them in their vessels, and whose lamps were gone out*? To the same purpose is the parable of the lord returning from a far country, calling his servants to account for the use of the talents given them†; and of the servants waiting for the return of their lord from the wedding‡, whose fidelity and vigilance were put severely to the trial: In the one case, by the great distance of their lord, and in the other, by the great uncertainty of the time of his return: The description of the day of judgement, which follows the two first of these para-

* Matth. xxv. 1.———13.

† Ver. 14.

‡ Luke xii. 36.

bles *, though not strictly parabolical, is so majestic, and yet so familiar, that the person must be defective, not only in faith, but in good morals, and in good sense, who can read it over with a perfect indifference.

THE second coming of Jesus, and the compleat rewards of his religion, were distant objects: As his disciples were called to a state of suffering, he was pleased to provide for their immediate comfort. That God is the guardian of oppressed virtue; that he protects the persons, yields to the requests, and will avenge the wrongs, of his servants, are truths which please upon a simple proposal. But the imagination loses itself in the comparison of the divine goodness with the imperfect degrees of it among men. Nothing can equal the tenderness and force with which this truth is conveyed in the parable of the unjust judge †; where the distress, the helplessness, the importunity of the suppliant are represented as prevailing at last, by continued applications,

* Luke xviii. 1.

† Matth. xiv. 32.—46.

over unfeeling inattention and unyielding obstinacy. “ The Lord said, Hear
 “ what the unjust judge saith. And shall
 “ not God avenge his own elect, which
 “ cry night and day to him, though he
 “ bears long with them? I tell you that
 “ he will avenge them speedily *.”

IN some of the discourses of Jesus, we find him making use of the language of allegory and metaphor: As when he describes himself under the notion of a shepherd, and his disciples as sheep; of a vine, and his disciples as branches. But it is now time to conclude the subject of his figurative discourses, and to proceed to others of a different kind.

S E C T. VI.

Farther Progress of his public Discourses.

IT has been already observed, that Jesus began his instructions with much plainness and simplicity; a manner suited to the great variety of his hearers,

* Luke xviii. 6. 7. 8

and in which men expect that truths of importance should be proposed to them. The change of manner which succeeded to this, when he spake by parables, and the propriety of the change, have also been taken notice of.

BUT there is a farther progress in his discourses, which highly merits our attention, I mean the rise from the figurative to the serious and awakening stile, in which he concludes his public ministry. It is observable, even of the figurative discourses, that in their progress they become more ardent and glowing: They are therefore very properly interspersed with those of the serious kind, and make a part of them. This is peculiarly remarkable in the three or four last chapters of Matthew's gospel.

THE same historian has given us, at full length, one of the most serious discourses which Jesus at any time spake to the multitude of his hearers *. It is

* The discourse here referred to is found in Matth. ch. xxiii. It contains a caution against the influence of the scribes and pharisees, a description of their characters, and a serious remonstrance against the infidelity of the whole Jewish nation.

not enough to say that it is serious; it is bold, affectionate, and pathetic. His own circumstances and the circumstances of his hearers make his discoursing to them in this stile gracefull and interesting. Jesus knew that he was soon to suffer. He foresaw the unavoidable ruin of the Jews, and had laboured, though unsuccessfully, to prevent it. One historian has told us, that he wept over the city Jerusalem, because she knew not the time of her visitation*. But here the feelings of pity are for a moment suspended, by reflections on the characters and vices of those who were the instruments of that misery. By the Scribes and Pharisees, on all occasions, the multitude was directed: The merit of their opposition will be examined in its place†. It deserves at present to be considered, with what propriety Jesus now proceeds to undeceive the people as to the characters of their guides, on purpose to detach them from a blind regard to their persons and opinions; an expedient which, though not successful during his

* Luke xix. 41.

† Chap. ix.

own ministry, might contribute, together with other helps, to the success of his apostles.

JESUS foresaw from what quarter the opposition would arise, and therefore he took early precautions against it. For this purpose, in his sermon on the mount, we have seen him warning the multitude against the hypocritical righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees; and when occasions offered, as often they did, the warning was renewed, sometimes in plain terms, for the most part in parables. But now it was proper, that the most vigorous measures should be used, to check the influence of his opposers; that the narrowness of their views, their malignity, and above all, that their hypocrisy should be openly detected.

THE vehemence of the manner, as well as the matter of this discourse of Jesus, now under consideration*, must appear highly proper, from observing, that it immediately followed his putting to silence

* Matth. xxiii.

the cavils of his enemies. It has been observed, that their cavilling and insidious humour was one reason why Jesus taught by parables. Much of it appeared through the preceeding part of his ministry. Till it was spent, or till it greatly subsided, his talking to them with seriousness or vehemence could scarcely be expected.

THE historian informs us, in the preceeding chapter of his book, with what dignity Jesus resisted and silenced the united attacks of his adversaries, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees; and also put questions to them which they were unwilling or unable to solve: “No
“man was able to answer him, neither
“durst any man from that day forth ask
“him any more questions *.” Their wit, it appears, was exhausted; so that now was the time for addressing them with seriousness and force.

THE vehemence of this discourse is proper on another account. It is chiefly directed against the Scribes and Pharisees, and may be viewed as a last effort for

* Matth. xxii, 46.

their conviction and amendment. Before this time Jesus had spared their characters; or, if he exposed them, it was done under disguise. But, when all ingenuity was gone, there remained no other expedient than this, to convince or reform them. Their hypocrisy, their pride, and their covetousness he had already pointed out to themselves. But the application was not so obvious to others, or rather no particular application had been made: Here it is made with equal plainness and force. It is to be observed, that the plain way of proceeding with a hypocrite is, of all others, to him, the most formidable. Distant insinuations to his disadvantage he may easily elude. But to have the mask in a moment pulled off, to have his real character, in all its deformity, laid open to view, astonishes, confounds, and overpowers. In this manner did Jesus proceed with his hearers, prompted by zeal for their amendment, and regret for that ruin which they were bringing upon themselves, by all their crimes, and

especially by the crime of rejecting the Messiah.

THE vehemence of this discourse of Jesus is dignified by the discovery which it gives of a total superiority to all sense of fear, and of an attention to his ministry which no consideration could relax. During its progress, he spake indeed sometimes with reserve; on other occasions he withdrew from the scene of danger. This conduct issued not from fear, but from zeal for the success of his labours, for accomplishing which, some time was necessary: The period now approached when, having instructed the world, he was about to suffer for it. This intermediate space one who consulted only his ease or safety would have dedicated to retreat; here, on the contrary, heroism and magnanimity are the qualities displayed. There are some follies of which men can bear to be told without being incensed. But to be told to one's face, that he is a villain and a hypocrite, is an offence which he will never forgive, and especially if he is conscious of deserving

the character. This charge Jesus brings against the Scribes and Pharisees. From their numbers, their reputation, and their power, every thing was to be dreaded, which revenge could execute or devise. Yet, even then, he acted with as much unconcern about himself, and attention to their welfare, as if he had been conversing with friends, and securing to himself the returns of mutual love and friendship. Here he acted precisely in the spirit of one of his own lessons, and has recommended it by the most effectual of all methods, to the practice of his followers: “Fear
 “ not them which kill the body, and af-
 “ ter that, have no more that they can do.
 “ But I will forewarn you whom you
 “ shall fear: fear him, which after he hath
 “ killed, hath power to cast into hell:
 “ yea, I say unto you, fear him *.”

THIS discourse has a beautiful aspect, as it was spoken in the close of his public ministry. Towards the conclusion of any work in which one is engaged, he commonly feels a disposition to ex-

* Luke xii. 4. 5.

ert himself to the utmost. The more important the work, the final efforts will be the greater. None could be more important than this in which Jesus was engaged ; the reforming and saving of men ; a work which he had always much at heart. The ardour of the warrior in the critical moments of conflict, cannot fully convey to our imagination the intenseness of his soul in this period of his labours, decisive of their success, and of the fate of a guilty people.

THAT Jesus spake this discourse in the immediate view of his death, is a circumstance which might give occasion to much beautiful reflection. In the concluding scenes of life, the mind is naturally serious, and expands itself with vigour on the objects of its attention. The thoughtless and dissipated have the experience of this feeling, when by old age, infirmity, or disease, those powerful monitors, they are warned that the exit of life is approaching. The greatest and most virtuous minds have it in the highest degree. The tender parent then views his offspring with an unexperienced fond-

ness : His thoughts, wishes, and desires, are more than ever serious and ardent. He trembles for their dangers, or exults in their prospects ; he enjoys all the pleasure of their blossoming virtues, or groans under the pressure of their vices, which are bringing him down with sorrow to the grave. The patriot who has nobly struggled to save his country, either from foreign slavery, or from internal corruption, forecasts in that serious hour all the possible variety of events which may befall it, and then both sees and feels the force of this truth, that virtue is the security, and that vice is the ruin of a people. Jesus must have felt on this occasion a tenderness and anxiety, beyond what any instance from ordinary life can exhibit. The objects of it were enemies, unprovoked and obliged. Their ruin, of which he had warned them, they were bringing on themselves. They were the people of God in a peculiar sense, yet had been always rebellious and undutiful. They had formerly rejected the prophets of God ; now they were rejecting his Son ; an act of disobedience

which was about to issue in their rejection and ruin. Hence, in this discourse, are combined the warmest zeal against their vices, and the deepest regret of their ruin; the one expressing all the majesty, the other all the mildness of divinity; the one, the terrors of an avenging judge; the other, the gentle glories of a patron and protector.

MOSES is described, toward the conclusion of life, expostulating with the people of Israel in the same pathetic strain *. The whole chapter referred to is very beautiful, and, was it not for swelling the page, would deserve to be transcribed. But the following passage is so much in the spirit of the expostulation with which Jesus concluded this discourse, and the similarity in point of language is so great, that a quotation is unavoidable. “The Lord’s
 “portion is his people. Jacob is the lot
 “of his inheritance. He found him in
 “a desert land, in the waste howling wilderness.
 “He led him about, he instructed
 “him, he kept him as the apple of his
 “eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest,

* Deut. xxxii.

“ fluttereth over her young, spreadeth a-
 “ broad her wings, taketh them up, and
 “ beareth them on her wings: So the Lord
 “ alone did lead him, and there was no
 “ strange God with him *. But he for-
 “ sook God which made him, and lightly
 “ esteemed the rock of his salvation †.”

The whole, in point of vehemence and
 tendernefs, can be equalled only by the
 concluding words of Jesus on this oc-
 casion: “ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou
 “ that killest the prophets, and sto-
 “ nest them which are sent to thee, how
 “ often would I have gathered thy chil-
 “ dren together, even as a hen gathereth
 “ her chickens under her wings, and ye
 “ would not! Behold your house is left
 “ unto you desolate ‡.”

* The public discourses of Jesus and his private
 sayings are distinct subjects. The former has been
 the subject of this chapter. The latter will occur
 in its place.

† Deut xxxii. 9.—12.

‡ V. 15

§ Matth. xxiii. 37. 38.

C H A P. VI.

Of his Miracles.

IN reading over the life of any illustrious person, both his sayings and actions have a claim to our regard. Noble sentiments naturally command attention, and even respect for the person who speaks them: But great actions give a dignity to sentiment and discourse which, otherwise, they could not reach. In this view, the great actions of Jesus deserve to be the subject of observation. Both his doctrine and miracles are beautifully interspersed in his life, and give a fine variety to his public ministry.

It was observed, that Jesus wrought some miracles in the earliest period of his ministry, before his doctrine was openly proposed*. No more was then offered on the subject than what the occasion required. But now it is necessary to consider it more at large; and it

* Ch. III. Sect. II. and III.

may be proper to begin with making an observation or two on the use and intention of miracles in general.

THE intention of a miracle is partly signified by the Greek word expressing it*. To the person in whose presence, or for whose conviction the miracle is wrought, it is a sign of extraordinary interposition: The work performed may be of such a kind as to convince him, that the interposition or agency can be no other than divine; and consequently a presumption arises, that the doctrine or message, which the miracle is wrought to confirm, must be divine also. The Latin word †, which has passed into several modern languages, conveys the more popular and obvious notion of a miracle, as an appearance, which, by exciting the passion of wonder, detains the attention to the proposal of a subject, and rivets the impression more firmly on the mind.

HENCE, it would appear, that one use of a miracle is to rouse the mind out of

* *σημειον*.

† *Miraculum*.

its languor, and to command attention. The most effectual method of rousing men is to apply to their imagination, and a miracle is a direct application to this faculty. Any uncommon appearance instantly seizes upon it; and as it is a faculty warm and fertile, any one appearance of this kind suggests the probability of others equally extraordinary. A total eclipse of the sun affects the imagination of an illiterate person so strongly, that he imagines the day of judgment is approaching: Yet this is no miracle; it is only, and simply, an uncommon appearance of nature. A real miracle therefore, where nature is crossed, or suspended in her operations, must be supposed at least to have the effect of rousing and awakening. The ardour of Moses to rescue his countrymen must have been greatly cooled by the ill success of his first attempts, and by living in exile during forty years. In this situation, what expedient can be imagined more proper to rouse his mind, and engage his attention to all the discoveries which were to follow, than the appearance of the bush burning with fire and yet not

consumed * ? Or what expedient more fit to enliven the minds of the oppressed Israelites, than to see the shepherd's rod converted instantaneously into a formidable animal ?

BUT miracles not only work on the imagination ; they address themselves also to our reason. Merely to rouse and alarm, might create a suspicion in the minds of men, that they were about to be imposed upon. But here is exhibited a species of proof, equally simple, obvious, and popular. Miracles, as has been observed, prove a divine interposition. The manner of proof is short and compendious ; men have no more to do, than to open their eyes, and instantly they see the conclusion. The bulk of men have little disposition to think deeply on any subject, and much less where truths are proposed which condemn their prejudices or vices. The ancient philosophers reasoned with much depth and acuteness : But their labour was lost ; the

* Exod. iii. 2.

world either could not or would not submit to the fatigue of following them. The indolent nature of man in every age seeks after the road to truth which is shortest and most expeditious. A miracle is an act of indulgence to this bias of our nature, and how lightly soever it may be regarded by some, in the view of an argument, yet no species of argument has been found more successful. “ Moses was learned in the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds *.” With all the splendour of abilities and alliances on his side, the Israelites scornfully rejected his first appearances as their deliverer. But as soon as he appeared armed with the power of miracles, and with the rod of God in his hand, “ then they bowed down their heads, and worshipped †.”

It ought also to be considered, that a miracle serves as a standing memorial of the truth which it is brought to attest. It seems to be inconsistent with the notion of miracles, to suppose them performed

* Acts vii. 22.

† Exod. iv. 31.

for any great continuance of time : Nor when once a point is fully established by miracles, does there seem to be any necessity for the repetition of them : Miracles credibly attested, and which did stand the fiery trial of enquiry immediately after they were performed, may be justly regarded by succeeding ages as sacred monuments of the truth to which they once gave, and to which they still give a divine sanction. All the miracles of Moses served this purpose. For this end the rod which had done such wonders in Egypt, and the pot with manna, the food of the Israelites in the wilderness, were miraculously preserved, that they might be monuments to them after they were settled in Canaan, that their deliverance, laws, and settlement, were effected by an agency wholly divine.

S E C T. I.

*Of the Propriety of his appearing as a Worker
of Miracles.*

By attending to the history of the world, in ancient and in modern times, we find, that pretensions have sometimes been made to the working of miracles. It has also been observed, that there is a bias in human nature extremely favourable to these pretensions; that, in fact, mankind have been always prone to admit them without examination, and consequently have been often imposed upon. The miracles of Jesus are found to occupy a station in the middle betwixt ancient and modern imposture *. Hence, a person who views objects in the heap, and who will not give himself the trouble to view them separately, doth instantly and

* The impostures here referred to are those of ancient paganism, and of popery some ages ago.

hastily conclude, that all miracles are of the same stamp. There have been impostures in the world, the credulity of men has been abused too successfully, and the authors of the imposture have sometimes triumphed in their success. But, to draw from thence any conclusion unfavourable to the miracles of Jesus, is as absurd as to determine, against the existence of sound reasoning, because sophistry sometimes prevails in the world. Jesus wrought miracles, and in doing so, there was evidently much propriety.

IN the first place, there was a general expectation of his appearing in this very character. It seems to be agreeable to the common sense of mankind, that one who pretends to exhibit a divine revelation, is necessarily obliged, in one way or other, to support his extraordinary pretensions. No expedient has been used with more success, than that of working miracles. When Jesus appeared among the Jews, a miracle, as a mode of proof, was not unprecedented; but what they had been long acquainted with, and what, on any ex-

traordinary emergency, they would be expecting. They were familiarized to miracles by those of Moses and of the prophets. The persons who witnessed the miracles of Jesus, were also prepared for them by the ministry of the Baptist, and expected them: "John," said they, "did no miracles, but all things that John spake of this man are true." The Baptist had given witness to him, that he was greater and mightier than he: Jesus taught as John had done; next to this, was it not natural to expect of him that he would supply the Baptist's defect? By the sample of miracles performed occasionally in the early period of his ministry, the expectations of men must not have been so much gratified, as roused: As soon as this was done, we are told, that "he went about healing all manner of sickness, and all manner of disease among the people *." When once he began to work miracles, it is evident he could not well discontinue: he was almost laid under a

* Matth. iv. 23.

necessity of going on from the demands of pity. By his doctrine, the multitudes were convinced, that he taught them as one who had authority to do so: And accordingly, on his coming down from the mountain, where he had been teaching, applications were instantly made him to exercise his healing power.

It was not only expected, that Jesus would work miracles; it was demanded in form, and his enemies insisted upon it. "We would have a sign from thee", was their language from the commencement till near the conclusion of his ministry. That no objection might arise from the want of signs, we see the signs repeated, till, in order to invalidate their force, they who asked them were driven to the most absurd expedients. As a demand was made, and was often repeated, the plea of inability or injustice might have been urged, had it not been complied with. The miracles wrought can therefore be imputed, neither to the artifice nor ostentation of the performer. They deserve to be viewed, rather in the agreeable light of indulgence to the im-

portunity of those who demanded them. Some pretenders to miracles have justly incurred suspicion by an ostentatious display of their art, when the world was neither expecting nor demanding it. Here a demand is made; no reason can be assigned, why it ought to have been declined or rejected: Every reason pleads for the contrary. That the success of the miracles of Jesus was not greater, does not lessen their merit. It only shows, that the prejudices of men were fixed, and that it was proper to apply this spiritual engine, in order, if possible, to remove them.

It was observed, that the Jews had been long in the habit of attending to this kind of evidence. The ancient Jews in Egypt had been persuaded by miracles to receive the religion of Moses. It was therefore reasonable, that their posterity should have the same kind of evidence offered in support of a new religion. Moses was a temporal deliverer, Jesus Christ a spiritual one; generally speaking, without the intervention of miracles, men are sufficiently disposed to exert themselves in getting rid of tempo-

ral evils : Prompting seems to be more needful, where their prejudices or vices must be dealt with, and their lives must be reformed. Here we are furnished with an additional reason why the religion of Jesus, though excellent in every view, should stand on the foundation of miracles, in order to its being decently received. Nay, as it was intended to supersede the Mosaic religion, and as in fact it did so, there was a necessity for the miracles being more popular in their nature, and superior in every other respect.

THE miracles of Jesus made their appearance at a time when the spirit of imposture prevailed greatly in the world. Vague pretensions may have the effect of bringing the very notion of a miracle into discredit : Hence it is necessary, that, by some respectable miracles, the general notion of their reality should rest on a proper foundation. The Jews had peculiar occasion for a criterion upon this subject. Many pretended miracles, at this time, and afterwards, were wrought on purpose to amuse them. About this time, they were possessed with the hope of deliverance

from the Roman yoke. Many, in this vain hope, attached themselves to Jesus; and all of them were, at any time, the easy prey of imposture. We are told * that some artful men, encouraged by the turbulency of the times, assumed the character of saviours of their country, and to support their pretensions among a people, to whom the idea of a miracle was sacred, pretended also or promised to work miracles. These performances, whatever they were, they displayed with much ostentation, and gave them the popular name of signs of liberty †. That such pretenders existed then, or very soon after, is a point clear from the writings of the New Testament. Among the events preceeding the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus fore-tells the appearance of false Christs and false Prophets. The Apostle John informs us, that these false spirits had actually gone forth into the world. Here, therefore, we see a people impatient for signs, and by their prejudi-

* Josephus Jewish wars. Ch. sect 4.

† Σημεία ελευθερίας.

ces, exposed to the wiles of deceivers. We see them, though the enemies, yet the objects of the compassion of Jesus. By the respectable miracles with which his ministry is adorned, they were furnished with a guide, by following whose directions they might easily elude the artifices of impostors, in the same way that the light of the stars, which shows the mariner his course, is his security against the influence of false lights, set up on purpose to mislead him.

THE miracles of Jesus with much propriety introduce his doctrine into the world. The doctrine of Jesus, as has been observed, stands distinguished by its purity and sublimity. It testified against the vices and prejudices of the times, and required, of all who embraced it, the higher kinds of virtue. We have seen, that the prejudices of the age and times were strong in favour of a temporal deliverance. To persons under the power of this prejudice, the doctrine of Jesus must have been highly disagreeable. What, for instance, could be more disgusting to all their prejudices than the instructions con-

tained in the sermon on the mount? But, by the miracles which he wrought, his doctrine was attended to, though often refined and unpopular; it was received as divine by some; it was applauded and admired by others *.

THE miracles of Jesus had the most happy tendency to produce new prejudices, so to speak, in the minds of men, as a counterpoise to their former ones. By

* Effects similar to these are sometimes produced on extraordinary occasions, by similar, though inferior causes. Suppose an army licentious and enervated by long inaction, or by any other cause, having in the end at their head an able general, whose aim it is to reform them, in order to their becoming good soldiers. What expedient shall he fall upon for this purpose? Doubtless, he must prescribe them laws, and threaten to punish the least transgression. But is this enough? No surely. If he trust wholly to the discipline, they will fall into mutiny. He must convince them of his extensive capacity. He must form great designs, and execute them with vigour. In short, he must perform prodigies in their presence. In the mean time, their former aversions are suspended, their new attachments increase, they submit to the greatest hardships, they cheerfully obey the commands of their leader.

the miracles, the doctrine became in effect more sensible, and more accommodated to the grossness of their conceptions. It declared war not only against the prejudices, but against the corruptions of the world. In combating and overcoming these, a kind of spiritual violence was proper. The times were corrupt, and miracles were provided as a remedy for the corruptions. They had eyes, but saw not, ears, but heard not, and hearts, neither did they understand. The design of these miracles was to open their eyes and ears, and so to work on their hearts, that they might turn and be healed.

THE miracles of Jesus serve to counterbalance the humility of his external appearance. The prejudices against him on this side were almost insuperable ; yet it was necessary they should be surmounted before his doctrine could be received. A person obscure in his birth, and in the early stages of life appearing in a public character, was not likely to be the darling of a people fond of show, and who expected their Messiah clothed in all the pomp of a conqueror.

Men will receive the best doctrine with coldness, if they are prejudiced against the person proposing it. When Jesus began to appear in public, the world wondered; but the wonder of many proceeded from disdain; nor was there a method more effectual for removing it than the working of miracles. The honours which were paid him, either by the few disciples of rank, or by the illiterate multitude, usually arose from this source. His miracles procured him the visit of Nicodemus, and his honourable testimony: It was after he had fed the thousands miraculously, that they proposed to make him a king.

MOSES scrupled to undertake the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt, till he was vested with such powers as made his public character respectable. He pleads as an excuse, that he was of slow speech, and of a slow tongue. He knew with what disadvantage he must appear, after a long absence and obscurity. He was also no stranger to the caprice of his countrymen. But, by the power of his miracles, he gained their

Hearts, and secured their confidence. The Egyptians were struck with terror, and allowed him to lead out that very people of whose power and numbers they were become jealous.

THE persons to whom Jesus appeared felt not only the power of prejudice, but the rage of disappointment. He appeared at a time when they were big with hopes of temporal deliverance, and in an attire extremely mortifying to all their prospects. They could not, therefore, without displeasure, look upon their humble deliverer. His appearance must have been a subject of ridicule, had it not been dignified by miracles. If any ridicule was employed by his enemies, it was in the commencement of his ministry; but the weapon was soon wrested out of their hands. Miracles, so various and so great, became the subject of examination; and, if they produced not all the effects we look for, this one at least is evident, that by the manner of the opposition, a testimony was given to the dignity of the person working them. The ascendant which the miracles gave,

they observed, perhaps they felt, and endeavoured by every art to diminish: As a last resource for defeating the miracles of Jesus, they form designs against his life. “What do we?” say they after the great miracle of raising Lazarus, “for this man doth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him, and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. Then from that day forth, they took council together to put him to death.”

S E C T. II.

Of the Credibility of his Miracles.

THE credibility of the facts recorded in the history of Jesus does not strictly fall within the plan of these observations. But the miracles are of such importance in his history, that there is not a single circumstance to be overlooked. Their credibility is essential to their honour; and the fulness of the evidence is of itself an important and interesting object.

Without entering into nice discussions or subtilties on this point, it is proposed to collect, chiefly from the history of the miracles themselves, the circumstances which seem to determine their credibility.

It is to be observed, in the first place, that the miracles of Jesus were foretold and described long before the performance. The prophets who foretell the appearance of the Messiah, describe him not only as a worker of miracles, but descend to some of the very miracles which the historians of his life tell us he performed *. The importance of this circumstance to the credibility of the miracles is obvious. It removes all suspicion of any design to impose on the understandings of men, to sway them by the power of novelty, or to surprise them by a species of proof which they had never before heard of. In this respect the miracles of Jesus have a great advantage over those of Moses. When Moses appeared, the notion of a miracle must

* Is. xxxv. 56.

have been new and unprecedented : Allowing this, there was no impropriety in the use of miracles among a rude uncivilized people. But, when the world became more polished, and by the frequency of imposture more suspicious and inquisitive, it was highly proper that the species of proof by which any new system was confirmed, should be previously notified, or be such as men had been in the habit of attending to. This applies to the Jews, the witnesses of the miracles of Jesus. They were much prepossessed against him, and it was of importance that the proof from this quarter should appear in the most unexceptionable light. Jesus had this in his eye, in the answer given to the disciples of the Baptist, inquiring if he was the Christ. He directs them to his miracles, in proof that he was, and appeals to the predictions of the same prophet who had described the character and performances of their master *.

* Matth. xi. 15. Is. xxxv. 5. 6.

THE credibility of the miracles of Jesus is also ascertained by the prevailing persuasion of his ability to perform them: A persuasion which must have been founded either on personal observation, or on the fame of the miracles. From this persuasion many were disposed to apply to him for exercising his power. From attending to the circumstances of the persons applying, it is absurd to suppose, that the applications could spring from any other source. Jesus had no splendid favours to bestow, such as have a tendency either to bias or to corrupt the mind. He had none of that outward glare about him, which allures the multitude. Besides, some who applied were in the higher stations of life, or distinguished by their virtue. We are not surprised to see Vespasian courted in this way by the Alexandrians, a superstitious and slavish people*: He was their new master, and an absolute prince. But when we see persons of all ranks applying to Jesus, whose external appearance was

* Tacitus.

not enticing, and from whose patronage nothing was to be expected, we must be at a loss to account for it, except in the manner already taken notice of. The application of the Roman centurion is the less exceptionable, from attending to the circumstances of his country and profession. It could issue from no Jewish prejudice. It could have no worldly interest as the object; nothing except the relief of his distressed servant for whom he applies. Jesus had promised at his desire, that he would come and heal him. He doth not simply testify his grateful sense of the intended favour, or only declare his persuasion, that Jesus was able to grant it; but he sinks and labours in expressing the strength of his persuasion:

“ Lord, I am not worthy that thou
 “ shouldest come under my roof, but
 “ speak the word, and my servant shall
 “ be healed. For I am a man under au-
 “ thority, having soldiers under me, and
 “ I say unto this man, Go, and he goeth,
 “ and to another, Come, and he cometh,
 “ and to my servant, Do this, and he doth

“it *.” In like manner, when we see the ruler of the synagogue falling at the feet of Jesus, and beseeching him to visit his only child who lay dying †; when we see the nobleman from Capernaum beseeching him to come and heal his son; pressing his request, unshaken by the appearance of neglect ‡; we can have no doubt that they were firmly persuaded of the power of Jesus to grant their request, and cannot assign any motive, except the obvious one, why they chose to apply to him.

THE greatness of the miracles also confirms their credibility. If any actions can be called miraculous, those of Jesus are indisputably so. In the simplest instances of cures performed, we find always some circumstances fixing this point; such as, that the disease was, in its nature, incurable, that it was inveterate, and had baffled every effort of art; that it was instantaneously removed, by a single word, sometimes without it, or by ap-

* Matth. viii. 8. 9. † Luke viii. 41.

‡ John iv. 46, 47.

plications from which, in a natural way, no relief was to be expected *. In the higher instances of exertion, such as raising the dead, we have no difficulty in determining them to have been miraculous. To explain them in any other way, is an attempt which must issue in confusion and absurdity; on which account very few have engaged in it. But it is of consequence to observe, that works so great could never have been admitted as true, by a scrupulous and inquisitive age, had there been any doubt of their certainty. Their greatness, which all had occasion to know, and which none ever contradicted, secures them against the suspicion of imposture. Impostors seldom deal in great tricks: This would offend too much against probability, and put men on the search. They usually satisfy themselves with little ones, because they are less open to suspicion, and more easily gain credit.

In the same light, we may also view the number of the miracles. It is evident

* Anointing with clay the eyes of a man born blind.

from the history, that Jesus wrought a great many. From some circumstances, it is probable, that there were many *, of which we have no account. It would be improper to say what number of miracles is necessary to establish the credit of a divine mission: But if they are once admitted in proof, every new miracle is supposed to exhibit a new argument in its support. It is also a point of fact, that there never has yet appeared any impostor, pretending to do a great many surprising works. One instance or two is commonly all that we are told of. With much wisdom they would not venture to stretch too far, lest the fallacy should be detected. The miracles of Jesus distinguish themselves from all such efforts, by this very circumstance. They are so numerous, that we can have no suspicion of artifice or imposition in the performance.

THE variety of the miracles is a circumstance distinct, yet not remote from their number, and serving the same end. As

* John xxi. 25.

no impostor ever pretended to perform a great number of miracles, so to one species of them they always, or usually limited themselves. It was the number and variety of the miracles of Moses, which at last persuaded the magicians, that the power by which he wrought them was divine. From the variety of effects in the universe, we conclude the existence of an almighty designing cause. One effect or two, or a few of the same kind, may be inadvertently ascribed to chance; but a variety of effects, all mutually distinguished, and each perfect in its kind, suggest the idea of a perfect agent, powerful and designing, employed in bringing them about. From the variety of the miracles of Jesus, it is reasonable to draw a conclusion in favour of their reality and credibility. For instance, the restoring of sight to the blind, in only a few cases, may be ascribed to art or chance. In a great many cases the supposition becomes quite improbable; in proportion as the cases increase, the improbability of the supposition increases also. But if the person who gives

sight to the blind, shall also cause the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak ; much more if he shall raise the dead to life, and not in one single case, but in a variety of cases, we have then all the satisfaction on the subject which the most scrupulous person can desire.

It is also to be observed, that the miracles of Jesus were wrought openly, without concealment or disguise. Pagan antiquity furnishes us with accounts of miracles, and of miraculous intercourses betwixt men and their deities : but the scene of them is always laid out of the reach of observation and discovery. Modern miracles also have in a great measure owed their being to the same source. When Jesus began the working of miracles, he did not retire into deserts or corners, as if there had been something in the operation to be kept secret, or which, if disclosed, would bring the whole into discredit. But as he appeared in the world on purpose to instruct it, and as for this purpose his doctrine was delivered in public, so his miracles, which were exhibited chiefly for

the support of the doctrine, were public also. Some of the miracles, from their nature, were more private than others; yet privacy was never industriously sought after, except where the reasons of it are obvious. An instance or two of this kind cannot be supposed to invalidate the credibility of great numbers openly performed. Considering the opposition of the world, it would not have been unreasonable, had the miracles of Jesus been less public; in some cases he might have changed his ordinary manner with propriety: But to the last he persisted in it; for instance, at the resurrection of his friend Lazarus only a little before his own death. The openness of the miracles was therefore a defiance to the malice, and a defiance to the incredulity of the world; it being as true of his miracles, as he asserted it to be of his doctrine, “I spake openly to the world. I ever taught in the synagogue and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing *.”

* Joh. xviii. 20.

THE credibility of the miracles is not a little strengthened by attending to the numbers and complexion of the witnesses: "At the mouth of two or three witnesses," says the law of Moses, "every thing shall be established." In the present case, then, there is no scantiness of evidence; most of the miracles being witnessed by multitudes who saw, and some of whom narrowly scrutinized every circumstance. Let us observe who these witnesses were. It is not fair to say that they consisted of an undiscerning multitude; for in this multitude were included both enemies and friends. Yet, let us suppose for a little that the credibility of the miracles of Jesus rests wholly on the testimony of the latter.

THE testimony of a friend in any nice case is commonly looked upon with suspicion. In the present case, the testimony of the disciples of Jesus deserves a great deal of credit. They had the best opportunities of observing every thing important to be known in the private life of their master. They were constantly about his person, and must necessarily have been put

on the secret, had there been any thing in the miracles which required secrecy. Judas was one of the twelve apostles. He is entirely silent on this head : He had the strongest reason to unveil the deceit, if there had been any. It must have rendered his treason more highly meritorious with the enemies of Jesus, and must have also blunted the edge of his own remorse. His silence therefore gives great weight to the testimony of the other eleven apostles, and removes all suspicion of partiality or artifice in the evidence which they give. It is not to be doubted that they had a considerable interest in the success of the miracles ; but it is also to be observed, that most of the miracles were but unsatisfying objects to men whose minds were elated with gay prospects. The miracles of Jesus were almost the only marks of external grandeur which he had about him, and withal were rather mortifying to their ambition and secular views. The views of the multitude were the same with those of the disciples. They were astonished at the miracles of Jesus, but they regarded them chiefly as

samples of his power, as a temporal monarch. It was after feeding some thousands of them miraculously, that they proposed to make him a king. In this miracle they could not possibly be deceived; and it could serve no purpose to impose the deceit on others. Besides, it is highly probable, that some of these very thousands afterwards joined in the popular cry against Jesus, and; on that account, had every motive determining them to unveil the deceit, in case there had been any.

IN any controverted case, the evidence of an enemy is always thought to be important and decisive. Now the enemies of Jesus for the most part were witnesses of his miracles, and it is no less true, that they acknowledged them to have been wrought. The public manner of working the miracles rendered the presence of enemies unavoidable. It was a bait to their vigilance and curiosity which they would greedily swallow. They witnessed his miracles, with an intention to improve them, as they did his words, to his disadvantage. Had they been

prompted by no motives of any kind, Jesus would have supplied the defect, from a regard to their conviction, and to the credibility of his miracles. Accordingly we see him selecting places and seasons for working, where enemies were most likely to be present. In the cases of casting out a devil, and of raising Lazarus, two important miracles, we see that enemies were present; nay we see them acknowledging the fact, which they would have been extremely unwilling to do, had it not been unavoidable.

THE unbelieving turn of the age in which the miracles of Jesus appeared, may also be produced in support of their credibility. It is true, that the Jews have been taxed with credulity by heathen writers. It is also true, by the testimony of their own historian, that at this period they were the easy prey of imposture. But on the subject of the character and performances of Jesus, it is evident that they were as incredulous as men can be supposed. Full of prejudice against his person, and enraged by the disappointment of their prospects, they were habitually

In the humour of cavilling at his words and actions. Yet their prejudices and passions never transported them so far as to dispute the facts. With respect to the world in general, it may be affirmed, that this age was of all others the most learned and inquisitive; an age the least proper for attempting to impose upon it any thing new or extraordinary, either not highly credible in itself, or unsupported by sufficient testimony. With respect to the Jews, the religion of Jesus was constructed by them, as threatening the dissolution of their own: On this account the miracles which supported it would be looked upon with a jealous eye, and narrowly searched into. They stood the fiery trial of that age, and now of many succeeding ones. They still shine with their native truth and beauty, and only shine the brighter by the absurd attempts which have been made to obscure them.

It is a point of fact, that at the very time when the miracles were wrought, some of them did undergo a severe scrutiny. The reasons of this scrutiny are obvious from what has been observed. The

enemies of Jesus were urged to it by the increase of his miracles, and by his increasing reputation. They resolved to examine if any deceit or defect were to be found. There is one miracle, on which we are told they risked making the scrutiny; the case of giving sight to a man who had been born blind *. In the detail given of the scrutiny, we must observe the passions of curiosity and jealousy violently agitating the inquirers. The surprise of the neighbours at the extraordinary cure gave occasion to the person being brought before the Pharisees †. At first, they only ask him how he had received his sight; to which question a reply is made distinguished by its simplicity. “He put clay
 “on mine eyes, and I washed and do
 “see ‡.” Upon this, they object against the possibility of the miracle from the alleged character of the performer; and again apply to the poor man, not for information, but to have his opinion on this very point. Dissatisfied with his opinion, and seeming to suspect his veraci-

* John ix.

† Joh. v. 13.

‡ Joh. v. 15.

ty, they apply to the parents, to know if this man was their son, if he had been born blind, and by what means his sight was restored. The answer received from the parents is clear and full on every point falling under their knowledge, points of great importance towards fixing the truth of the miracle; for the rest, they refer to the declaration of their son. To the man himself the Pharisees again apply in a way the most effectual to shake his former declaration, had it not been consistent with truth: "Give God the
 "praise, we know that this man is a sin-
 "ner *." His reply on this occasion still preserves the beautiful simplicity which characterises his whole behaviour: "Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not.
 "One thing I know, that whereas I was
 "blind, now I see †." With the most anxious curiosity, and with as little success, they continue the search, till checked and overcome by a display of unshaken boldness, which nothing less than truth could inspire.

SOME of the miracles of Jesus have their

* Joh. xi. 24.

† Joh. v. 25.

credibility confirmed by the ridiculous attempts of his enemies to invalidate them, not by calling in question the fact, but by ascribing it to some other agency, or by cavilling at some trifling circumstance in the performance. When Jesus opened the eyes of the man born blind ; when in presence of these cavillers he healed the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda, on the Sabbath-day, their taking such offence at this one circumstance, the time of working and maintaining it so firmly, must create a presumption, that the miracles were unexceptionable in every other respect. Their virulence and personal abuse on these occasions form a presumption to the same purpose. When men of dishonest minds are severely pressed by facts, instead of combating them directly, they will seize on any one detached circumstance, either unimportant, or incidental, if possible to give the whole complex case an unfavourable aspect. Such was the conduct of the enemies of Jesus on several occasions.

THE sacred historians give us one memorable instance of absurd animosity a-

gainst him on account of his miracles; I mean, when it was alledged and maintained, that he cast out devils by the agency of the devil. Perhaps this instance is selected from others of the same kind on account of its absurdity: "There was brought to him," says the historian, "one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb, and he healed him, inasmuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw*." Each circumstance in the miracle is so clear, that there could be no doubt of its reality. The people in amazement cry out, "Is not this the son of David†?" The enemies of Jesus with indignation reply, "This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Belzebub the prince of the devils‡:" An allegation which evidently discloses how little their reason and how much their passions were exercised on the subject. They blacken the miracle, because they cannot destroy it; and, at the same time, give it an honourable testimony, by attempting its destruction in open defiance

* Matth. xii. 22. † Matth. v. 23. ‡ Matth. v. 24.

to truth and common sense. “ Every
 “ kingdom,” says Jesus on this occasion,
 “ divided against itself is brought to de-
 “ solation ; and every city or house di-
 “ vided against itself cannot stand ; and
 “ if Satan cast out Satan, how then shall
 “ his kingdom stand * ?”

By all such attempts, in early or latter times, the miracles of Jesus have considerably gained in point of credibility. They resemble some magnificent pillar, against which the storms of many ages have spent their fury in vain : Or rather they resemble the everlasting hills, which stand not only unshaken, but whose verdure is improved, by the winds and rains which beat upon them.

S E C T. III.

Of the Circumstances which give a Lustre to the Miracles.

THE miracles of Jesus are not only credible, but possess a peculiar dignity and

* Matth. xii. 25. 26.

grace, corresponding to the dignity of the person who performed them, and of the religion which they were wrought to establish.

THE miracles derive their lustre, in some degree, from the circumstances which establish their credibility. Such are particularly, their greatness, their number, their variety. These qualities, to whatsoever subject they belong, excite sublime or pleasant ideas in the mind of the beholder. When we view them in the works of nature, we conclude these works to be the effects, not of chance, but of design. That the miracles of Jesus, by their greatness, number, and variety, acquire a splendor, and make a sublime subject of contemplation, no person will deny, who has either judgment or honesty to admire the following description of the prophet, when only viewing them at a distance :
 “ The wilderness and the solitary place
 “ shall be glad for them, and the desert
 “ shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.
 “ It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice
 “ even with joy and singing. They shall
 “ see the glory of the Lord, and the ex-

“ cellency of our God. Then the eyes of
 “ the blind shall be opened, and the ears of
 “ the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall
 “ the lame man leap as an hart, and the
 “ tongue of the dumb sing: For in the
 “ wilderness shall waters break out, and
 “ streams in the desert.”

THE gradation or rise in the miracles is a circumstance not to be overlooked. They are not crowded into any one period of the life of Jesus, but they dignify and adorn the whole. And, if there be any superiority in this respect, we will find it, where we naturally look for it, in the middle, or rather towards the close of his ministry, when we expect to find his zeal burning with its brightest flame. This circumstance is very observable in the miracles of Moses. The miracle of the rod turned into a serpent; of the hand of Moses becoming leprous, the hand in which the rod was to perform such wonders; and the whole succession of the subsequent mi-

* Isa. xxxv, 1. 2—56.

racles follow each other in a series so regularly progressive, that, though only a piece of history, they have the effect of elevating wonderfully the imagination of the reader. The plague sent on the first-born of man and beast with great propriety terminates the gradation *. I shall not pretend to say, that the gradation in the miracles of Jesus is equally regular: Yet something of this kind is extremely observable. By attending to the order of time in which they were wrought, it appears, that the curing of diseases was among the first †, and raising the dead to life some of the last, of these performances. Of this latter, was the resurrection of Lazarus, the most important and best attested of all the miracles. To the beauty of the gradation, Jesus seems to have had some regard, in his reply to the disciples of John inquiring, whether he was the Christ, or if they must look for another: “Go,” says Jesus, “and tell John the things you hear and see.

* Homer’s description of a pestilence, *Iliad* i. will naturally occur to the learned reader.

† *Matth.* iv. 24. *Ch.* viii. 2. 5.

“ The blind receive their sight, and the
 “ lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and
 “ the deaf hear, the dead are raised up,
 “ and the poor have the gospel preached
 “ to them *.”

THE miracles of Jesus serve to display the beauties of his personal character. It will be found, that the greater part of the miracles were wrought in consequence of application or intreaty. On these occasions, the conduct of Jesus is adorned with the most delicate expressions of compliance and pity. The instance of the leper, who applied for himself, as Jesus came down from the mountain †; of the centurion, applying for a favourite servant ‡; of the sick of the palsy, brought in his bed, and let down by the roof ||; of the ruler, whose daughter lay at the point of death, and expired before his arrival §; are so many occasions which display that divine compassion which was ever open to the cries of the miserable : A compassion surmount-

* Matth. xi. 4. 5.

† Matth. viii. 3.

‡ v. 8.

|| Luke v. 18.

§ Luke viii. 41.

ing every obstacle, unconquerable by opposition, and with dignity triumphing over it. The circumstances of the last mentioned application are remarkably beautiful. We see a ruler of the synagogue falling down at the feet of Jesus, beseeching him to come into his house; the more importunate in his intreaty, as probably he had been either an enemy, or liable to the imputation, of being one, and on that account also the more doubtful of success; to crown all, his case pitiable and pressing: “He
 “had one only daughter about twelve,
 “and she lay a dying.” As Jesus went to the house, the people crowded about him, and in the throng, a most compassionate cure was wrought, only by touching the hem of his garment. In the mean time, the young woman expires, and messages are sent to prevent his taking any further trouble. This new distress has the effect of heightening the compassionate favour. It instantly drew forth from the mouth of Jesus that reviving declaration, the prelude of the miracle: “Fear not; believe only, and she shall be made whole *.”

* Luke viii.

BEAUTIFUL as these instances are ; yet they yield to others, where Jesus wrought his miracles without application. To prevent intreaty, to watch for opportunity of doing good to others, is the very essence of a benevolent character, and is the perfection of an amiable one. The miraculous draught of fishes * is perhaps one of the lowest of these instances. We cannot suppose, that the disciples could either ask or expect such an appearance in their favour. But, as the miracle, by its greatness, was fitted to inspire every sentiment of respect ; so the occasion of working it served to give a full opening into the indulgent character of their master, at the moment of his calling them. His entering soon after into Peter's house, and healing his wife's mother, who lay sick of a fever †, was also an act of indulgence, and peculiarly fitted to secure the attachment of this zealous disciple. The feeding of thousands miraculously with a few loaves and fishes, gives a happy and striking instance of an attention descend-

* Luke v. 1. † Matth. viii. 14.

ing to the most ordinary wants of men. The cases of dispossession have the most humane aspect, where the misery was great, and no application supposeable, nor any desire of relief.

THERE are two instances of such distresses as every day occur, in which we see Jesus interposing, unasked, with the most exquisite sensibility. One is a case of infirm old age; the other, of youth cut off in its bloom; distresses mortifying to the pride of man, and always deeply affecting a generous mind. “Wilt thou be made whole?” says Jesus to the old man lying at the pool of Bethesda*. The helplessness of distressed old age cannot be painted in more lively colours, than in the simple account which the man gives of himself; as never was relief dispensed with more grace and dignity: “Jesus saith to him, Rise, take up thy bed and walk †.” The other distress is still of a more tender kind, the untimely death of an only son; a distress always great, but on the present occasion heightened by the concurrence of

* John v. 5. † John v. 8.

affecting circumstances. Jesus “ went in-
 “ to a city called Naim, Now, when he
 “ came nigh to the gate of the city, be-
 “ hold there was a dead man carried out,
 “ the only son of his mother, and she was
 “ a widow. And much people of the
 “ city was with her *.” In attending to
 the narration, we sympathize deeply with
 the distress of the sorrowful mother, we
 even participate in the sympathy and sor-
 row of the attendants. Such a distress was
 adapted to the divine pity of Jesus.
 “ When the Lord saw her, he had com-
 “ passion on her, and said unto her, Weep
 “ not †;” and “ he came and touched the
 “ bier, and said, Young man, arise ‡.” And,
 lest the immediate object of the miracle
 should escape us, the historian has shut up
 the account of it with observing, that Je-
 sus “ delivered him to his mother ||.” Great
 actions in ordinary life have often much
 of the terrible in them; if they have
 beauties, yet they are usually of the aw-
 ful kind: But, in the miracles of Jesus,

* Luke vii. 11. 12.

† Luke vii. 13.

‡ Luke v. 14.

|| Luke v. 15.

there is nothing alarming; they were hurtful to none, and beneficial to all who felt their influence. We naturally wish ourselves to have been spectators of those agreeable scenes. This was the charm which overpowered the stupidity or prejudices of the multitudes, when the other charms of the miracles seemed to have operated faintly. On occasion of one of the lowest exertions, the multitude was capable of making the following reflection: "He hath done all things well; he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak *."

THE miracles of Jesus express with much energy the genius of his religion. The genius of the Mosaic religion was rigorous and severe. The miracles of Moses, for the greater part, were fitted to inspire terror. Rivers flowing with blood; seas divided, stopt in their course, and recoiling again; burning mountains, thunders, darkness, tempest; are all grand ob-

* Mark vii. 37. Every Greek scholar must perceive that *καλως*, *beautifully*, loses much of its energy in the translation.

jects: But they overwhelm the mind, and we tire in contemplating them. The miracles of Jesus have their lustre wholly of a different kind. They are mild, and pleasant to behold. Every miracle presents us with objects which not only excite wonder, but are agreeable to the imagination; on some occasions, the necessities of men liberally supplied; on others, health, vigour, and even life, restored. The enemies of Jesus were as malicious as they were active in opposing him. Their malice and activity he could have easily overpowered by inflicting plagues on them, as Moses did. Instead of this, his miracles are uniformly gracious, expressive of the mild genius of his religion, and of the benevolent design of his appearance.

THE miracles of Jesus serve to convey his instructions with the greater meaning and dignity. To overturn prejudices fostered by false notions of religion and strengthened by age, and to substitute good principles in their place, must be a matter of great delicacy, and will

always require the most vigorous exertions. It was observed, that this was one great object of the parables of Jesus. It was an object of his whole ministry, and, with infinite propriety, enters into his miracles. The prejudices of the world against his person, made it proper that he should work miracles. There were also prejudices which no power less than that of miracles could be supposed to combat with any probability of success, and against which we find particular miracles opposed.

THAT calamities are always the offspring of crimes, is one prejudice to which the depraved nature of man is exceedingly prone; the Jews of those times were much under the power of it: To weigh merit in the scales of fortune, to measure the favour or displeasure of the Deity by outward circumstances, is a sentiment exceedingly faulty in the eye of reason, and which required correction. We are told, in the gospel-history, of some who came to Jesus under the power of this prejudice, telling him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacri-

nces *. On that occasion, he exposes the danger and absurdity of the error by plain illustration, and also by a parable. On occasion of seeing a man who had been born blind, the disciples of Jesus fall into the same mistake †. Whether did this man sin, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus in a moment solves the difficulty by restoring him to the use of his sight. He did so without going out of his ordinary tract. Miracles made a part of his work; and his compassion always prompted him: But the occasion called for an extraordinary interposition; and the miraculous cure was the most effectual expedient for forcing an access to hearts fenced by prejudice against the common feelings of humanity.

THE Jews were also much prejudiced in favour of ceremonial duties, to the undervaluing of others uncontrovertedly moral. They had some countenance from their law in putting them on a level: But, by the traditions of the elders, the former had obtained a great superiority. For in-

* Luke xiii. 1. † John ix. 12.

stance, the command to sanctify the seventh day of the week in honour of the Creator, had lost with them its original spirit, and was sunk into superstition. A change in the day of the week for the acts of religious worship, was about to be introduced. Previously to this change, it was highly proper to undeceive them in their notions of the sanctity of any day, as independent of divine authority, or as incompatible with the discharging any duty of morality. We know how Jesus defended his disciples, when they were censured for plucking a few ears of corn, as they passed through a field on the Sabbath day *. But the doing of a miracle on that day was still more silencing than any reasoning on the subject.

THE presence of a man who had his hand withered, and the insidiousness of his enemies, furnished him with an occasion †: “Is it lawful to heal,” say they, “on the Sabbath-day? that they might accuse him.” Another historian ‡ represents them as only

* Matth. xii. 1. 2.

† Matth. ix. 10.

‡ Luke vi. 7.

murmuring among themselves, or watching him, whether he would do it. With what graceful dignity does Jesus proceed to silence their cavils, and to clear up the puzzling difficulty! “He knew their
 “thoughts; and said to the man with
 “the withered hand, Rise up, and
 “stand in the midst. And he arose, and
 “stood forth. Then said Jesus unto them,
 “I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful
 “on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do
 “evil? to save life or to destroy it? And,
 “looking around upon them all, he said
 “to the man, Stretch forth thine hand;
 “and he did so: And his hand was resto-
 “red whole as the other: And they were
 “filled with madness *.” This is not a
 single instance; the miracles of healing
 the woman under an infirmity of eighteen
 years †, of healing the man of the drop-
 sy ‡, of healing the lame man at the pool
 of Bethesda, were all performed on the
 Sabbath-day, and have the force of

* Luke vi 7.—11.

† Luke xiii. 11.

‡ Luke xiv. 1.

the strongest argument on the subject *.

AN unreasonable antipathy against the Gentile world also characterised the Jews of this age: The wall of partition was now about to be levelled; and, for this event, it was highly proper that the Jews should be prepared. Jesus prepares them for it in the beginning † and in the progress of his ministry: Many of the parables have this as their object ‡. But by applying the force of his miracles, by working them without distinction, at the entreaty, and for the benefit of Gentiles, this end was more effectually served. What could have a more powerful tendency to persuade this haughty people; that the blessings of heaven were now to be imparted with an undistinguishing liberality? What stronger incentive to an enlarged benevolence, and a virtuous emulation ||?

* The use which our Saviour made of his miracles for illustrating his doctrine, is explained more fully in Dr Gerard's excellent dissertation on the evidence of Christianity.

† John iv.

‡ Luke xv.

|| The history of the acts of the apostles shows how necessary it was, that the Jews should be enlightened on this subject.

ritual system. On this subject, Jesus chose to undeceive them, both in his plain and figurative discourses. But even his miracles have a significant language on the subject. None of them were exertions of mere power, or adapted to inspire terror. That power was guided by mercy, and shone with its mildest glories. It could command the winds and the waves, it could raise the dead to life, and yet not give the alarm to the rulers of the world. The lustre of his miracles was to issue from another source. He came to seek and to save that which was lost: To heal the sick, to cleanse the lepers, to cast out devils, to raise the dead, were exertions more expressive of his character, and of the design of his humble appearance, than others which might have had a greater glare in the eye of the world. This circumstance in the miracles serves to explain the reply of Jesus to the disciples of the Baptist: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another," "one splendid and triumphant? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and show John again the things which

“ ye do hear and see.” Having enumerated his miraculous works, he concludes the reply with the following plain insinuation of their excellency : “ Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in me *.”

THE miracles of Jesus derive much lustre from his manner of working them. Simplicity and ease are qualities in any work, which shew it to advantage, and heighten its value : If the materials be rude, and if the work produced be perfect, we must admire it the more on that account ; and must also think with the greater respect of the abilities of the artist.

ACCORDINGLY, we see Jesus performing his miracles with the utmost simplicity of manner. They are often, to all appearance, casual and incidental. At other times, he wrought his miracles, when prompted by intreaty, or where the occasion offered so full, that it would have been out of character not to have wrought them. The manner of doing them is remote from all suspicion of deceit or vain-glory. As no ostentation is displayed before, so none

after the performance. Often he forbade those who were the objects of his goodness to speak of the person to whom they were obliged ; a hard prohibition to a grateful mind ! Often, as soon as the work was over, he withdrew into some private retreat. This circumstance strengthens the credibility of the miracles ; but it does more ; it exhibits them in their native beauty and dignity. It is indeed hard to say whether the ease or dignity of the manner is most strongly expressed. To expel diseases by a single word, sometimes without one ; by a word to command the winds and waves ; by a word to raise the dead bodies of men, sometimes almost from corruption ; are appearances which surpass all that we can imagine.

THERE are two great miracles of Jesus, particularly distinguished by the simplicity of the operation : The raising Jairus's daughter and the widow of Naim's son *.

* In the raising of Lazarus from the grave, there is, at least, the appearance of labour. The mind of Jesus was not only agitated with sorrow on account of the distress of his friends, but we see him

In both instances, there is a beauty of manner suitable to the occasion of them. In the latter instance, the interview was intirely accidental ; no application made ; no expectation of a miracle. At the same time, the most ordinary work could

entering upon the performance, as if it were an uncommon effort. It may be observed, that this miracle was wrought near the conclusion of his ministry ; a period distinguished by the most vigorous conduct. His last discourses bear all the marks of it. This miracle was one of the last, and, by attending to its circumstances, was also the greatest of his miracles. We may look upon it therefore as a last effort for the conviction of his opposers ; and, on that account, we may expect every appearance of vigour in the execution. On other distressful occasions, we see him applying to God. Here was both a public and a private distress. His mind was softened with pity and grief : At once he sheds tears over the incredulity of the world, and over the grave of his friend. The appearance of labour in this miracle might also have the effect of preparing, gradually, the minds of the witnesses for what was to happen, and of striking them with its majesty. We have something similar to this in the solemn description given of the creation of man, “ God said, Let us make man in our image, and after our likeness *.”

* Gen. i. 26.

not have been accomplished with greater facility : “ Jesus came and touched the
 “ bier, and they that bare him stood still;
 “ and he said, Young man, I say unto thee,
 “ arise. And he that was dead sat up, and
 “ began to speak *.” The same beauty of manner is observable in the other miracle. Jesus had been sent for by Jairus to see his daughter. When yet at some distance he heard of her death. On approaching the house, he witnessed all the solemnities of a sorrow, of which his absence or delay was the cause. The case was therefore interesting, and more solemnity of manner is to be expected than on any ordinary occasion. The public character of Jairus, the presence of his family and friends, the freshness of the sorrow, the noise of the mourners, their entire despair of the young woman ever being brought to life again, as they fix the credibility of the miracle, so they bestow a lustre on the simplicity with which it was performed : “ He went in,
 “ and took her by the hand, and the maid
 “ arose †.”

* Luke vii. 14. 15.

† Matth. ix. 20.

THE simplicity of manner, displayed on other occasions, requires no illustration. The miracles derive no embellishment from the pen of the historian. The most laboured description could not give us more sublime ideas of the performance, than the few simple words with which it is commonly accompanied. As when Jesus said to the leper, “I will, be thou clean; and immediately his leprosy left him *.” When he said to the wind and sea, “Peace, be still; and the wind ceased, and there was a great calm †.” When he said, “Lazarus, come forth; and he that was dead came forth ‡.” These expressions bear a resemblance, both in sentiment and in sound, to the following one, so much admired by Longinus: “Let there be light; and there was light.” To which the words of the psalmist may be viewed as a paraphrase: “He spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast ||.”

A few instances, where, besides speaking some words, other means were used,

* Matth. viii. 4. † Mark 4. 39. ‡ John xi. 43. 44.

|| Psal. lxxxvi.

do not derogate from the simplicity of the miracles. In the application of these means, there is either some visible propriety, or they are so very inconsiderable in their nature, that it would be absurd to ascribe to their influence the miraculous effects produced. The ointment of clay, and the muddy pool of Siloam, could have no natural efficacy in making a man see, who had been born blind *. The very baseness of the materials dignifies the work, as it had the effect of rendering the miracle, which the enemies of Jesus attempted to overthrow, so full of circumstances, and consequently so credible, that they were in the end obliged to desist from their enterprize.

THE dignity of manner which distinguishes the miracles of Jesus gives them a superiority to all other real or pretended miracles. Among heathen miracles, those of Vespasian recorded by Tacitus are looked upon to be the most respectable †. From the superiority of his station in life, we are led to expect a corresponding dignity of manner. We might

* Jo. ix.

† Tac. hist. cap. iv.

venture to suppose, that the Emperor's miracles are credible ; though there are many circumstances which would lead us to presume the contrary : Such as his not working any cures till he was applied to, and then working only two of the lowest kind : Such as the rise of the application, "*Monitu dei Serapis;*" which is saying, in other words, that it took its rise from the priests of Alexandria, fond, no doubt, of an opportunity to ingratiate themselves with their new master. We are told, accordingly, that the device had its effect: "*Miracula evenere, queis coelestis favor, et quaedam in Vespasianum inclinatio numinum, ostenderetur.*" In fine, there is the circumstance of the rank of the patients: "*Ex plebe Alexandrina quidam,*" is the account given of one of them; the other is mentioned without any mark of distinction from the former: So that it would be making no stretch to say, that they were the fittest persons to be practised upon.

LET us now proceed to inquire, if the lameness of the miracle, in point of cre-

dibility, be compensated by the dignity of manner in doing it. Here we will find ourselves greatly disappointed. The first object offering itself to our view, is the manner in which Vespasian received the application. We see this supposed wonder-worker partly making a jest of it, partly despising it, as a piece of flattery and profaneness. Upon the application being urged, he begins to grow serious; he feels himself agitated by hopes and fears, the fear of disappointment, and, cheered by his flatterers, the hope of success. Shall it be said, that this is the person from whom we would expect a miracle? Vespasianus primo irridere, aspernari, atque illis instantibus modo famam vanitatis metuere, modo obsecratione ipsorum et vocibus adulantium in spem induci." But all ideas of dignity vanish from our minds: He becomes an object of contempt or pity, when we see him applying to the physicians to have their opinion about the probability of success. Their opinion was favourable, and also seasoned with the most artful flattery. It was their opinion, therefore, which si-

nally determined him, which dissipated his fears, and inspired that cheerfulness in his countenance when setting about the operation, which is the only circumstance that has the least shadow of dignity. Add to this, that his prosperous fortune, a point on which he was often flattered, seems, on this occasion, to have intoxicated his mind, and prompted him to the enterprize. This is the plain account of the transaction, as recorded by Tacitus: “ Igitur Vespasianus, cuncta fortunæ suae patere ratus, nec quicquam ultra incredibile, lacto ipse vultu iussæ exsequitur *. It were easy to contrast this miracle with the gospel-miracles, on

* That the fairness of the quotations may appear, the whole passage is inserted at full length.

Per eos menses, quibus Vespasianus Alexandriae statos æstivis flatibus dies et certa maris opperiebatur, multa miracula evenere, queis coelestis favor et quaedam in Vespasianum inclinatio numinum ostenderetur. Ex plebe Alexandrina quidam oculorum tabe notus genua ejus advolvitur, remedium coecitatis exposcens gemitu, monitu Serapis dei, quem dedicata superstitionibus gens ante alios colit; precabaturque Principem, ut genas et oculorum orbes dignare-

purpose to expose its absurdity. The miracles of Jesus stand in need of no foils to display their merit; but the power of pre-

tur respergere oris excremento. Alius manu aeger, eodem deo auctore, ut pede et vestigio Caesaris calcaretur, orabat. Vespasianus primo irridere, aspernari; atque illis instantibus modo famam vanitatis metuere, modo obsecratione ipsorum et vocibus adulantium in spem induci. Postremo, aestimari a medicis jubet, an talis coecitas ac debilitas ope humana superabiles forent. Medici varie differere: Huic non exesam vim luminis, et reditum si pellerentur obstantiae; illi elapso in pravum artus, si salubris vis adhiberetur, posse integrari. Id fortasse cordi deis; et divino ministerio Principem electum. Denique, patrati remedii gloriam penes Caesarem, irriti ludibrium penes miseros, fore. Igitur Vespasianus, cuncta fortunae suae patere ratus, nec quidquam ultra incredibile, erecta quae adstabat multitudo, iussa exsequitur. Statim conversa ad usum manus, ac coeco reluxit dies.

Tacit. Hist. lib. 4. pag. 353. edit. Lips.

During the months which Vespasian passed at Alexandria, awaiting a safe passage from the gentle weather returning with the summer, many miracles were wrought, whence was signified to Vespasian celestial favour, with the concurrence and designation of the deities. A certain man of Alexandria, one of the commonality, noted for want of sight, prostrating himself at his feet, implored a cure for his blindness, by premonition from Serapis, the god whoræ

judice itself cannot connect any ideas of dignity with the bare execution of orders, preceeded by every symptom of distrust:

that nation, devoted to superstition, adores beyond all others. He besought the Emperor, that, with his spittle, he would condescend to wash his cheeks and the balls of his eyes. Another lame in his hand, at the direction of the same god, prayed him to tread upon it. Vespasian at first derided and refused them. As they continued importunate, he wavered: Now, he feared the character and imputation of vanity; anon, was drawn into hopes, through the intreaties of the supplicants, and the arguments of flatterers. At last, he ordered the physicians to examine, whether such blindness and such lameness were curable by human aid. The physicians reasoned doubtfully: "In this man, the power of sight was not wholly
 " extinct, and would return, were the obstacles re-
 " moved; the other man's joints were distorted, and
 " might be restored with regular pressing and strain-
 " ing. To the gods, perhaps, the cure was well
 " pleasing, and by them the Emperor was ordained
 " the divine instrument to accomplish it. To con-
 " clude, from the success of the remedy, the glory
 " would accrue to the prince; if it failed, the
 " wretches themselves must bear the derision." Vespasian therefore, conceiving that within the reach of his fortune all things lay, and that nothing was any longer incredible, performed the task with a cheerful countenance, before a multitude, intent upon the

Nor can we ascribe much merit to a fit of high spirits, which prosperity and flattery may at any time produce. Such miracles one would have cause to be ashamed of, or of any system which they served to support. Had the miracles of Jesus been of this stamp, whole volumes had been filled up in exposing their absurdities. But his miracles are not merely unexceptionable: They bear the test of the nicest examination; the more nearly and narrowly they are viewed, we see more of an inherent splendor. The former have an artificial and wavering glare; the latter resemble the bold and piercing rays of the sun.

To the apostles of Jesus, his miracles had a most beautiful significancy. They served not only to convince them of his divine mission, but furnished the most powerful antidote against the offence of the cross. By the prejudices which they had imbibed from education, and national

issue. Instantly, the lame hand recovered full strength and upon the eyes of the blind light broke in. GORDON'S TRANSLATION.

taste, they were but ill prepared for witnessing the sufferings of their master. Melancholy arising from disappointment was soon to succeed in room of the most flattering prospects. But here was a medicine always at hand, effectual for expelling the poison, if they had only composure to use it. In the dark interval betwixt the agony of Jesus and his resurrection, it is not to be doubted, that the great miracles of his life would be under a cloud. But we may reasonably suppose, that the first impressions which they made on the disciples would recur, and save them from total despair. I am sensible, that the despair of the two disciples, whom Jesus met on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, may be produced to invalidate this allegation. But then, it is no more than we have reason to expect, and what we know to be fact, that some of the twelve were men of slower apprehension, than others. Besides, the history immediately following the resurrection of Jesus, exhibits a notable instance of the effects produced by the

miracles of his life. After the disciples had seen him risen from the grave, some doubted. In order to remove all doubts from their minds, and to give them full satisfaction, he was pleased to mingle with them casually, as they were fishing*; and, by his direction, they obtained a miraculous draught: “They were not able to draw the net, for the multitude of fishes.” The conclusion which the apostle John made on this occasion, was exceedingly just and natural: “Therefore, he said unto Peter, It is the Lord†”. It recalled the idea of his former miracles, and of the very miracle of Gennesareth‡ by which they had been determined to forsake their nets and follow him. His own resurrection was a subject which, though often mentioned, none of them had been able to comprehend. The possibility of it was not a subject of reasoning: But it was in effect demonstrated by the great miracles of raising the dead. One of these will be the subject of the following section.

* John xxi. 1.

† xxi. v.

‡ Luke v. 1.

S E C T. IV.

Of the Resurrection of Lazarus.

THE miracles of Jesus furnish such variety of pleasant speculation, that it is not to be wondered if we lose ourselves in them: At the same time, they have such a striking similarity of aspect, that, for the greater part, the observations which we make on any one of them are applicable to all.

THE miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, is however an exception. It is unquestionably one of the greatest of the miracles: It is the fullest, and most diversified in all its circumstances, and has beauties peculiar to itself which demand our attention.

IN the *first* place, this miracle is remarkable, as an exertion of private friendship. It gives a sanction to the exercise of this elegant affection, and displays the character of Jesus in a most amiable light. It has been often observed, that friendship

was designed by the Author of nature as a relief from the labours, and as a balsam to the troubles, of life. Jesus Christ took on him all our innocent infirmities. His labours for the happiness of men were great : From these he took respite in the endearments of friendship. He had one friend among his apostles, and one family among the multitude of his followers distinguished by the honour of his frequent visits, and now by his raising one of them from the grave.

THE sickness of Lazarus, the distress of his sisters on that account, and the message which they send to Jesus, are the circumstances which introduce the narration of the miracle. In the message of the sisters, there is an energy and pathos which a person of tolerable sensibility must feel : It expresses at once their entire confidence in the friendship of Jesus, and the ardour of his affection. On other occasions, the messages or applications are usually introduced with some respectful expression of belief in his power : “ Lord, help me ;” “ If thou wilt, thou canst make me whole :” Or they are di-

rect applications to his pity and goodness. But the present was the distress of a friend; and, in this light, the application is made. No uncommon ardour, no vehemence is expressed; nothing but a simple mention of the case, and an implicit acquiescence in his method of treating it: “Therefore his
 “sisters sent to him, saying, Behold, he
 “whom thou lovest is sick *”.

JESUS suspends the exercise of his friendship. It will afterwards appear that he was determined by motives truly great: “When he heard that Lazarus
 “was sick, he abode two days still in the
 “same place where he was †.” Yet, in his behaviour, we may discern some traces of a concealed sorrow, expressed in the frequent mention of his friend, and of his purpose to see him: Besides, when he sets out for Bethany, he does it in the face of remonstrances made against his engaging in a scene of such danger. On his arrival there, we see the most graceful dignity displayed in an interview with one of the sisters; we behold his sorrow begin-

* Joh. xi. 3.

† Joh. xi. 4.

ning to swell by the time of his meeting with the other: “ Martha said to him, “ Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. Jesus saith to her, “ Thy brother shall rise again *.” On the approach of Mary, whose deeper grief is marked by her words, her gestures, and the grief of her attendants, language fails him; he groans in spirit, and his soul is troubled. With difficulty is he able to inquire for the grave of his friend, and bedews it with his tears: “ Jesus wept †.” The reflection of the spectators upon this tender interview is the same which must have been made on any similar occasion: “ Then said the Jews, Behold, how he loved him ‡ !” If therefore the meltings of sympathy for the distressed of others, if the most vigorous efforts to relieve them, are essential to friendship, we may behold it here displayed in its full lustre ||.

* Joh. xi. 21. 23. † Joh. xi. 35. ‡ Joh. xi. 36.

|| It has been indecently urged against the religion of Jesus Christ; that it gives no countenance to private friendship. But, it is apprehended, that this piece of history furnishes a sufficient defence.

THIS miracle has also a very beautiful aspect, as it shows the attention of Jesus to the circumstances of his apostles. E-

Reasons may be assigned, at least may be conjectured, why Jesus did not enact any laws, nor give, like some of the philosophers, dissertations on the subject. From the nature of the affection, it must be wholly a matter of choice : From its delicacy, it is reluctant to the very appearance of compulsion. Besides, it is an affection so casual, it hangs on such a variety of nice conjunctures, that perhaps the greater part of mankind pass through life without having tasted it in such perfection as we may easily suppose it capable of. To have made laws on the subject of friendship, and only on that of the most perfect kind we can suppose it decent to have made them, seems therefore to be unnecessary. These laws must have been entirely beyond the reach of ordinary practice, and on a subject in its nature incompatible with restraint,

The propriety of the omission must also occur to any person who attends to the genius of the Christian religion. If the end of it be charity, and charity of an extensive kind, it would have been, long before this time, charged with inconsistency, had any laws been made, either directly or by consequence, confining its exercise. For, with all deference to the affection of friendship, so much extolled in theory, and so low in the ordinary commerce of the world, it is perhaps more closely allied to the selfish, than any other of the social affections.

ven the manner in which he notifies to them the death of Lazarus is remarkably delicate. Of all the images by which the notion of death is conveyed to the mind, that of sleep is most pleasing. It clothes this formidable object with several agreeable circumstances, and strips it of many which are disagreeable. Ease, freedom from pain, a renewal of vigour, all enter into the image: “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep *.” They did not however comprehend his meaning, nor appeared to have been in the least alarmed with the notice: “Lord, if he sleepeth, he shall do well †.” He was therefore obliged to be more explicit on the subject, that they might be prepared for witnessing the scene of sorrow, whither he was about to lead them. The weakness of their minds, their interest in the

and more in danger of interfering with an enlarged benevolence.

Jesus, by his example, authorizes and recommends friendship, at the same time that he leaves it to be a subject of choice and taste.

* Joh. xi. 11. † Joh. xi. 12.

concerns of their master, and their attachment to Lazarus, concurred in making this preparation necessary. The discovery, though delicately conducted, seems to have thrown them at first into the very phrenzy of sorrow. Thomas was a person by all accounts not under the power of a lively fancy *, yet he was the person who, on this occasion, said to his brethren, “ Let us go also, that we may die with him †.”

THE whole transaction shews, that the comfort and stability of the apostles were at this time much in the eye of their master. He could have cured the sickness of Lazarus by a word, or he might have set out instantly on his journey to see him. But, after receiving the message, “ he abode two days still in the same place ‡” where he received it. He no doubt felt tenderly for the distress of his friend, yet he suffered it to take its course. He suspended the relief in this case, which in all other cases he had been prompt to

* See Joh. xiv. 5.

† Joh. xi. 16.

‡ Joh. xi. 6.

bestow. His having the power to raise Lazarus from the dead prevents the imputation of a behaviour incompatible with friendship. His suffering the disease to go on, when he could have checked it, shows that his mind was capable of including other objects within its compass. The comfort of his apostles was an object which naturally presented itself to him on all occasions. On this occasion of distress, he is transported with the view of it into a kind of mysterious pleasure: "Jesus said plainly, Lazarus is dead. "And I am glad for your sakes I was not "there, to the intent that you may believe *."

HE had experience of the slowness of their understandings, and of the weakness of their faith. He had often told them of his own resurrection ; but the meaning or possibility of that event they could not comprehend. Some conception of it was necessary to preserve them from despair, when they should see him expire on the cross. He had already raised o-

* Joh. xi. 14. 15.

thers from the dead for their conviction on this cardinal point. But there were circumstances in the present miracle which served not only to strike, but to rivet the impression. The sadness of the occasion, the gradation and solemnity of the performance, and the interest of the disciples in the person miraculously raised to life, are circumstances which happily concur in producing these effects. Here then were measures taken which, though they proved ineffectual to prevent the scandal of the cross, yet have an unquestionable merit in them ; since the conclusion on the whole was evident, that he who saved others from death, who by a word could give life to a dead body after being four days in the grave, was also able to fulfil his repeated promise, that on the third day after his own death he would rise again.

BUT the variety of design in working this miracle is not yet fully unfolded. The great end of the public ministry of Jesus was the instruction of mankind. Let us observe the propriety of almost every circumstance to accomplish this end.

THE delay of the journey from Galilee to Bethany must not be overlooked. By the delay, Lazarus was not only dead, but had lain in the grave four days, before the arrival of Jesus. By the delay, therefore, the miracle became more bright, and the truth of it more determined. The scene of this miracle furnishes another circumstance extremely favourable for promoting the same end. It was not laid in Jerusalem, where the minds of men might be supposed to be held in awe, or biassed by power, where the miracle might be charged with ostentation, and where personal prejudices were triumphant. Nor was it laid in a desert, where there might be suspicion of deceit, but at the distance of only two short miles from Jerusalem.

THE precise time of the arrival of Jesus at Bethany is a circumstance which must be viewed in the same light. His coming so late destroys all suspicions of any concert. It gave his enemies an opportunity of observing the whole transaction; as the season was of all others the fittest for finding access to their minds. He was under no necessity of affecting the appear-

ance of sorrow, for he felt its reality *; and the reality both of his sympathy and sorrow did not fail to make him an object of regard †. The sisters of Lazarus by this time were receiving the humane visits of their neighbours and friends. Many of the Jews from Jerusalem had come out to Bethany on this errand: Jesus himself approaches, and mingles with the company as a mourner and friend. The season of sorrow is, of all others, the most favourable to religious sentiment: When Jesus therefore saw the Jews also weeping, who had followed Mary out of the house, then was the time for attempting an impression; which he did by leading them to the grave of Lazarus, where he mingled his tears with theirs in memory of his friend; and, as a proof both of his friendship and of his power, called him forth from the grave. The malice of some of the Jews, their insinuations of a defect in the power or goodness of Jesus ‡, the unbelief, the despair of Martha, his friendly correction of it ||, his application to God

* John xi. 35.

† Ver. 36.

‡ Ver. 37.

|| Ver. 21. 26.

for success *, the dignity and familiarity with which he called upon Lazarus from the grave †, are circumstances well fitted to have raised conviction, in the minds of all who were open to conviction, that the person who could do works so great, and with such ease, was in every respect what he professed to be. The effects produced instantly by this miracle were very considerable. The historian informs us, that “many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him ‡.” That some of them did not believe, will be no matter of surprise, if we attend to their conduct on similar occasions.

THE consistency of the ends pursued in the working of this miracle is very observable. The ends, as we have seen, are various, yet they are finely connected, and form so many links of the same chain. A private interest first presents itself. We perceive another interest, only a little more extensive, succeeding to our view, and this again succeeded by another, the lar-

* Johu xi. 41. 42.

† Ver. 43.

‡ Ver. 45.

gest and most extensive of all. We see friendship, family-interest, the general happiness of mankind, all moving on in the same direction, without interfering, and strengthening each other in their connection. Thus, the gentle stream glides unperceived into the river, and both lose themselves in the boundless ocean.

THERE is one circumstance, in this miracle, of which the whole indeed is expressive; I mean, the ardour with which Jesus pursued his generous designs, unwearied by opposition, and unmoved with consequences. When, on hearing of the sickness of Lazarus, he proposed to return to Judea, his disciples objected to him the danger of the proposal: “Master, the
“Jews of late sought to stone thee, and
“goest thou thither again *?” We admire the stern virtue of the noble Roman, who set out for Carthage to encounter tortures which, consistently with honour, he could not avoid. But a calm contempt of danger, a cheerfulness in encountering danger when duty calls to it, are higher ex-

* John. xi, 8.

ertions; and they are no where more simply, or more suitably expressed, than in the following reply of Jesus to his disciples on this occasion: “Are there not twelve
 “hours in the day? If any man walk in
 “the day, he stumbleth not, because he
 “seeth the light of this world. But if a
 “man walk in the dark, he stumbleth, be-
 “cause he hath no light in him*.” Words to which the following may serve as a commentary, in case any should be required: “I must work the works of him that
 “sent me while it is day; the night com-
 “meth, when no man can work †.”

* Ver. 9. 10.

† Jo. ix. 4.

7 BP 55

The End of the FIRST VOLUME.