THE NATURAL OR THE SUPERNATURAL?

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BY A LAYMAN.

> I found ever during all that long time, more fruit in one houre's sobrietie, prayer, and humble meditation, than in a thousand daies of curious or presumptuous inquisition.
>
> NAPIER of Merchiston, 1611.

EDINBURGH
EDMONSTON & DOUGLAS
MDCCCLXXIV

PREFACE.

THE following pages are published as a plain, unpretending, yet, it is hoped, a common-sense plea, for the existence of the *supernatural* in the world's history. In most of the sceptical writings which I have read, the old argument from prophecy is either entirely evaded, or, in a few sentences, conveniently shelved, by relegating the prophetical writings to the category of myths, or by alleging that they refer exclusively to contemporaneous events, or by simply characterising them as so poetical and obscure that almost any interpretation may be given with equal propriety. On the other hand, the whole energies of the author are industriously bestowed on minute and comparatively unimportant criticism, or in plausible proofs of contradiction, or in arguments intended to disprove whatever claims to be miraculous in the Gospel narratives. It would, however, be far more to the point were such writers to attack questions relating to *undeniable and still existing facts*—such, for instance, as the present most remarkable state of the Jews, viewed in relation to the very many prophetical statements of the Bible. Are any of those writers who

treat so lightly all Scripture Prophecies as mere conjectures, willing to favour us with one of their own? If prophesying be such easy work, will none be bold enough to measure swords with Isaiah and Daniel, and tell us what Dr. M'Caul asks—the fate of Paris or London a hundred years hence?

Had I known, as I do now, the peculiar difficulties attending colloquial writing, I should not have attempted that mode of dealing with my subject. It is quite enough for any one to state his own views, without having to express those of another from whom he wholly differs. It is hard indeed to hold the scales aright in such a case. I had read dialogues in which the vantage ground seemed to be unfairly preserved for the orthodox disputant. The sceptic, on the other hand, was little better than a man of straw, set up to be knocked down, forced to assume the most untenable positions, and to forego the most obvious opportunities of reply, while the whole discussion was closed with an abject retractation by the sceptic of all his former views. I thought that this kind of error at least might be avoided. It is not for me to say to what extent I have succeeded in the attempt, but I am certainly very far from asserting that the personage designated *A* in the dialogue has had his views fully given, or that they have been expressed to the greatest advantage. I can only affirm that I have done my best to fight his battle, and am certain that I have nowhere treated him

with intentional injustice. Besides this, neither disputant has been forced to "retire vanquished," for the discussion is made to end where it began—neither party having been made to change sides.

While these sheets were passing through the press the President of the British Association, departing, as it seems to me, from the objects for which the Association was founded, intimated, from the presidential chair, his acceptance of materialistic principles. There may be a few individuals of peculiar mental constitution, such as I have referred to at page 60, who can continue to practise morality while believing in no God above them, and in no other world than the present. But is any one prepared for the general spread of such a negative creed? We have crime enough in our country as it is: What will be the result if the thirty millions of our countrymen were to throw off their belief, imperfect though it may be, in a Heavenly Father, and in a future state of rewards and punishments? Our wife-beaters and wife-murderers are low enough in the scale of morality: Will they be raised by being informed that all human beings are similar in kind to the brute creation, and that when their lives come to an end they will perish like the beasts, and their souls will be annihilated?

The answer to all this, which will no doubt be made by such philosophers (falsely so-called), is, that they must proclaim the truth, come what may. But are such views really truth? do they rest upon the

same basis as the Newtonian philosophy? or upon any intelligible basis whatever?

The restless activity of the advocates of infidelity in our day to overthrow Christianity is further evidenced by an important anonymous work which has just appeared. In two most erudite volumes, entitled *Supernatural Religion*, the whole New Testament is treated as a purely human production, abounding in worthless legends about miracles. The grand conclusion arrived at by the author is thus stated:—"We do not find any real trace even of the existence of our Gospels for *a century and a-half* after the events they record."

Now, if the four Gospels were not compiled till a century and a-half after Christ's death, and if the writers, in their zeal for the supernatural, inserted false legends to prove the Divinity of Christ, how could they make him utter the prediction that had (to all appearance at least) been then contradicted, of his coming in the clouds before the generation whom he addressed had passed away? Whatever may be the explanation of that prediction as recorded, —and different explanations have been given by commentators,—there can be no doubt, as Gibbon says, that the belief of the early Christians was the literal one,—that their Saviour should revisit the earth before they themselves died. Will any man out of bedlam believe that *the four different writers of these Gospels, who were anxious, above all things,*

to prove the Divinity of Christ, were so madly blind as, a century and a-half after His time, to insert such a prediction as this, which had long before that time been (to all appearance at least) contradicted? The argument, then, as stated at page 45 of the following pamphlet, seems to me absolutely conclusive as to the fact that our Gospels date from the generation to whom that prediction was addressed.

But irrespective of the objection now stated, I have further to express dissent from the conclusions of the author of these volumes. He shows that the early Christians did not use the exact words which are employed in our Gospels; from which he infers that they must have quoted from other earlier Gospels, which have been lost. The same argument will also disprove the authenticity of the Old Testament, for our Lord and his Apostles seldom quote the *ipsissima verba* of the Old Testament. In short, it does not seem to have been the practice in those early days to make *verbatim* quotations, but simply to give the gist of the passages to which they referred.

EDINBURGH, *December* 1874.