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THE BIBLE

IN ITS RELATIONS TO THE PRESENT AGE.

AN

Address to Young Men,

BY

PROFESSOR MARTIN,

OF ABERDEEN.

DELIVERED TO THE BELMONT STREET YOUNG MEN'S
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THE following Lecture was delivered by Professor MARTIN of Marischal College, to the "BELMONT STREET YOUNG MEN'S ASSOCIATION," Aberdeen, on the evening of Monday, 20th January, 1851, and is now published by permission of the Lecturer.

March, 1851.

THE BIBLE

IN SOME OF ITS RELATIONS TO THE PRESENT AGE.

AFTER some preliminary remarks, the Lecturer proceeded nearly as follows :—

The Bible is a book for all ages and generations of the human race. Its express object is, to supply wants which are permanent and universal. Nevertheless, as Society in its career of unceasing change comes into new conditions of existence, and, passing into higher or lower stages of civilization, discloses new evils, or becomes conscious of new wants, it will frequently be found that for many of these occasional and incidental evils, the word of God is the appropriate remedy. To illustrate the peculiar adaptation of the Word to certain acknowledged evils and tendencies of the present age is my immediate object.

In the *first* place, then—The Word may be viewed as unfolding a system of Duties—as a code of Ethics or manual of Morality.

There is, in the mind of man a faculty, whose express and positive office it is to announce and enforce his duties. Over and above every other principle of action implanted in the breast—over appetite, desire, affection, and self-love has there been placed by the Creator as their judge and regulator, a faculty, even Conscience, whose singular prerogative it is to sit and rule within the breast with supreme autho-

riety and ultimate jurisdiction. Divested as this faculty has been of that irresistible power and quick sensibility with which it must have come from the hand of the Creator, it yet exhibits such indubitable marks of sovereign dignity,—presents such incontrovertible titles to sovereign authority, and, moreover, even yet, when fully roused to action, enforces its decisions on a reluctant will with such formidable punishments, as fully to vindicate its claims to the high position we have assigned to it.

But this faculty must be educated. It must be enlightened by the truth, and strengthened by exercise. It must be taught to speak in conformity with the absolute and unalterable dictates of morality; otherwise, surrounded as it is by a noisy and clamorous crowd of passions, and, solicited by desire, it may cast in its verdict on the side of error, and lend an unhesitating sanction to the perpetration of wrong.

The education of the Conscience is one of the most solemn duties incumbent on man. To ensure that its voice shall ever be heard on the side of rectitude—that it shall be quick to detect and bold in denouncing vice—that it may be trusted to with implicit confidence, and obeyed safely with instant promptitude, is the worthiest aim of a moral being. Here, then, is one of those permanent and universal wants to which I referred in the outset, and to which I now refer, only as leading up to some special and peculiar wants of the present age. Here is a permanent want of a complete and enlightened education of the Conscience.

How shall such a want be supplied? Where shall we find a moral standard so pure, lofty, and complete, and, at the same time, so clear, simple, and authoritative as to form an available instrument of popular moral education? To what ethical text-book shall we have recourse, or, under

Whose feet in a matter of such overwhelming importance may we safely place ourselves? There is but one answer to such interrogatories as these. There is no moral standard the world has ever seen—no exposition of the duties of man,—no text-book of morality, which, as regards every element of power over the heart and conscience, can stand for a moment in competition with the Bible. And, accordingly, it is to it and to it alone, that, under the Divine blessing, in lands where it is the text-book of the Pulpit, the daily manual of the School, and the familiar companion of the Family, there is, by the confession of impartial spectators, with much remaining imperfection and vast distance from the fulness of the original, a yet higher standard of public morality, and a healthier tone of public sentiment, than the world elsewhere witnesses.

Breathing unsullied purity in every dictate, teaching alike by precept and example, and commending itself not less to the mind of the enlightened than the understanding of the simple, the Bible possesses every quality which can contribute to success as an instrument of popular education.

If therefore, on looking around us we see irreligion or vice ravaging society, or any short-comings from the holy and lofty standard of Bible morality, our remedy is obvious. If devotion to the interests of time to the exclusion of eternity—if pursuit of gain to the violation of every duty of Religion, Morality, or Reason—if idolatry of wealth, irrespective of moral principle—if selfishness, unscrupulous of the feelings or rights of others—if intemperance, wasting the resources of the State and ruining men's souls—if a languishing spirit of Christian practice in our Churches—if a neglect of religious training in our Families—if a careless superintendence of youth in our workshops and factories—if a growing

disregard of the Sabbath, or Sabbath ordinances—if these, or such as these, be at all evils of the present times, our course is clear. We have only, under God, in our families, schools, and churches, to bring His Word into closer contact with the conscience of society to ensure relief.

Secondly, We may consider the Bible as a Text-Book of Natural Theology.

Nature herself teaches us of God. She unfolds with wonderful clearness His character as the Designer and Governor of the world, and lays down the outlines of that system of theology which a subsequent Revelation has filled up to the full limits of man's present necessities.

Nature tells us, for example, that there are many and powerful reasons why death should not be our destruction—that the purposes of the Almighty, unveiled in the world around us, demand that we should live hereafter,—that the vast powers conferred on us, unemployed and undeveloped here, must yet receive their appropriate exercise,—that the moral disorders of the present life must yet be rectified,—that every wrong must yet be righted,—every crime recompensed,—and every sufferer avenged,—and that Divine justice must yet be vindicated from all charge of unfairness and partiality; and that, therefore, it must, in all likelihood be, that on another and higher stage of existence we should find a place.

Still more full and decisive are its teachings on the character of Him with whom we have to do. A Designer possessed of infinite Wisdom, a Governor of unbounded Benevolence, and a Judge of inflexible Rectitude, she proclaims as with a trumpet.

What, then, we may ask, is the treatment which this evidence receives at the hands of man? Does he listen pa-

tiently to her teaching, and does he receive her solemn lessons in their full extent and significancy? Unquestionably, it must be confessed, he underlies, at the very least, a strong temptation to deal partially with her proofs. Aware, as he is, by the light of natural conscience alone, that he has transgressed the law written within him, it cannot be said that he listens to the natural proofs of that inflexible justice which characterises the Divine government with the same easy tranquillity with which he regards the proofs of Divine benevolence. The proofs of the former constitute to him the dark side of Nature. They cause him to tremble. They render the Future terrible, and Death a source of continual dread. Much more pleasant, undoubtedly, for him to turn from these gloomy and saddening thoughts to contemplate Nature in her bright and sunny aspects. Far better for him to hear of the Creator's compassion, and the boundless benevolence displayed everywhere in His works. At least, so he reasons. And, accordingly, what Nature can teach him that can raise his confidence in the prospect of death—what tidings she can bring to him of the Divine beneficence—what proofs she can offer him that the Almighty disposer of his destinies is full of compassion for His suffering creatures, and what emboldening courage she can thus infuse into a heart almost inclined to sink at the dread uncertainty of a hereafter, these he willingly receives. But not, it must be said, the equally clear, definite, and convincing evidence of a Divine Justice. The tendency, too often is, to disparage this.

It must not escape your notice, that the vast progress of modern physical science falls in with such a tendency. Every step in its progress hitherto has been an additional discovery of the Divine benevolence, and Natural Philoso-

phy and Natural History are still daily accumulating proofs, from every kingdom of Nature, of an all-pervading Goodness. And so it must ever be. So long as we study only the Physical—the properties and collocations of matter—the movements and the mechanism of material systems, or even rising to the region of life and sensibility,—so long as we look at Nature only with the eye of the Naturalist—studying everything but man, or man only in his relations to Nature,—in short, so long as we regard only the Physical, and neglect the Moral, we can read, as respects the moral character of the Almighty Architect, only of Benevolence. Considering, therefore, the paramount importance attached in the present age to the sciences of the outward and material, in connexion with the natural tendency of the mind to the exclusive consideration of the Divine benevolence, it will not surprise us we if find that the tendency of modern Natural Theology is to condense the moral perfections of the Deity into this single attribute.

From this tendency, however, we must, with gratitude, confess, many of the ablest scientific writers of our own country are completely free. The works of Chalmers, Miller, and M'Cosh do of themselves sufficiently vindicate for our national literature a freedom from such a taint.

But where, you may ask, lies the evil of such a tendency as this? The answer is at hand—it tends to licentiousness. Theology, thus rendered imperfect and thus mutilated in her teachings, only removes those restraints to sin which are imposed on men by the dread of future retribution. It is but too often the case that where such a creed exists, we find, as a practical consequence, moral obligation impugned—moral distinctions questioned, and the existence of sin denied. 'Tis of the highest importance, therefore, that Natural Theology should be founded on the entire, uniform, and universal ex-

experience of man—should eschew favouritism,—deal impartially with the Sciences, and, altogether irrespective of human tastes and prejudices, explicitly declare the truth. That we are under a moral government, or one in which near intimation is made that the Divine Governor is on the side of virtue, and opposed to vice, is a simple fact. It is clearly taught in the Science of Mind, and is demonstrated in History, two as rightful portions of the Science of Nature—as Physiology itself. Everywhere in the moral constitution and life-experience of man are there presented to us proofs of a moral Designer, Governor, and Judge. But how shall we ever induce men to study sciences like these? Even had we text-books of Moral science, manuals of History, or Treatises on Natural Theology fairly unexceptionable, when might we expect for works like these universal acceptance and currency? Fortunate, truly, it is when the remote is the unnecessary. But such is the case here. The Bible is precisely the book which immediately, pointedly, and completely counteracts the tendency referred to. Its very theme is man—its very field the one where shines most lustrously forth the moral perfections of the Deity.

To the Bible, then, we must look as the remedy. To its profound and comprehensive theology we shall owe it, if, in this favoured land, the prodigious advances of physical science, and the unbounded disclosures of the Divine benevolence, are not perverted to licentiousness.

In the *third* place, we may regard the Bible as a text-book of Revealed Theology, and, moreover, as pertains to it in this character, one that claims a Divine energy and blessing as its rightful accompaniments.

The theology of Nature is confessedly insufficient for our

present spiritual wants. So much, indeed, is this the case, that to the awakened conscience Natural Religion must ever prove an unfailing source of alarm and uncertainty. 'Tis from Nature that man learns there is a God of justice. 'Tis by Nature he is told he may live hereafter. From Nature he understands that he is indeed a sinner, and through Nature he is assured there must yet be punishment. But whether punishment can be in any degree averted—whether anything he can do shall avail to appease the Divine anger—whether God can pass by and pardon transgression in consistency with His justice, of that it says nothing. It reveals the disease, without unfolding a remedy. It says—God is just, and man is a sinner; but at the question of the awakened conscience, How, then, shall I escape? it is inexorably dumb.

As respects this grand, permanent, and universal want of man, Natural Theology is valueless. To Revealed Religion we must look, and to that Divinely revealed plan, by which whosoever will, may now effectually escape the full penalty of his transgressions.

In this relation to the present age there is nothing special or peculiar. But not so in the following:—

First, Even for the attainment of that moral reformation of society of which I have spoken, the Bible, as a revealed system, is, under the Divine blessing, the only effective agency. It is, in fact, not as a mere moral text-book that the Bible can ever accomplish even its purely moral purposes. Its revealed element alone it is that has gotten for it its renowned power of shattering the firmest habits of vice, and lifting the lost to decency and virtue, so that he, who only for moral ends would seek the assistance of the Word, with no higher aim than that

elevating his fellows in the social scale, must take the Word of God in all its fulness—as bearing the stamp and signature of God, and as instinct with an energy that is Divine, even the energy of the Spirit, the Almighty Instructor and Regenerator of man, if he would effect his purposes.

Secondly, General and continued ignorance of the Word of God in a community, produces two evils.

The Word is, to the vast mass of men, its own evidence. The self-evidencing character of its doctrine when allowed to influence the practice, is such as to confirm and consolidate Faith in its Divine origin. “If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God,” was the distinct declaration of its Divine expositor. General ignorance of the Word necessitates, as a consequence, general ignorance of its evidence—takes down, in the case of the great majority of men, the only remaining barriers against religious doubt—nay, in lands where Christianity is seen only in a corrupted and debased form, effectually provokes it. The consequence is clear—the seed is Ignorance, but the harvest is Infidelity.

Not, however, as a necessary and invariable consequence. There may be those, and not a few they generally are in every community to whom awakened conscience will ever prove an effectual preservative from religious scepticism, and to whom, therefore, the cold, negative, and disheartening creed of the Deist or the Atheist must ever be repugnant. Religion they must have, and in them, therefore, the result is different. With no light to guide them in their approaches to God—left to the suggestions of their own darkened understandings, or to the unchecked influence of corrupting example, ignorance of the Word is the mother of Superstition. And thus is it, that, in the

present day, in lands where the Word of God is practically excluded, and where ignorance of its character or its evidences extensively prevails, we see Infidelity and Superstition growing luxuriantly side by side. Need you enquire then, in sight of evils such as these—sprung from Ignorance of that Word alone—does the Bible have any peculiar relation to the present age? Certainly! I say, society is, this hour, labouring under evils for which the unmingled and living truth of the Word is the only existing remedy.

Thirdly, 'Tis always difficult for the actors in any age rightly to understand its spirit as distinguished from the past. We tend indeed generally to measure the Past by the analogy of the Present, and are but imperfect judges of those slow but steady changes in the spirit of the race which need ages for their development. I believe, however, that I am hazarding no unsupported assertion when I say, as distinguishing the spirit of modern European society from that which characterized it at the distance of a century, that it is distinguished by the rise and predominance of a spirit of intellectual Pride. The advance of knowledge, and the want of a corresponding advance in the power of enlightened religion, have mainly contributed to this.

It is only, however, in its influence on Religion that we seek at present to consider it—an influence not difficult to discover, accomplishing as it does in lands where the Bible is not unknown what Ignorance itself effects where the Bible is a stranger.

It favours Scepticism. The Word demands Humility, and, where it really operates on the heart, enforces its demand with resistless efficacy. Pride, it dethrones, denounces, and extirpates utterly; and thus rendered, by

very nature, the uncompromising enemy of Pride, it makes Pride its enemy. And an active, unscrupulous enemy it proves—questioning its authority, denying its evidences, and undermining its influence. No Scepticism so bold—and none so irreclaimable as the Scepticism of Pride.

But here also, as in the case of Ignorance, Doubt is by no means its only possible manifestation. It may scorn fidelity. It may have sagacity enough to see that, determined disbelief of the truths of religion is, even on the lowest principles of reason, utterly unwarrantable. In such a case, it is no contradiction to assert, it will invariably be found, that even Pride can be religious. Give it only the power to frame a religion for itself—to devise its own ritual, and fashion its own creeds—give it enough of the Divine to satisfy its Conscience, and enough of the Human to gratify its taste—and ask no constrained and humiliating subjection to that which is written—and no zeal will be more fervent, or proselytism more assiduous than that of Pride. The superstition which an Apostle characterized as “will worship,” and “voluntary humility,” is the form and substance of its religion.

What, then, can we say to this? In the presence of so anti-christian, and wide-spread a spirit—even now growing into a power that may overshadow the world, we can feel but the more impressively that under the Almighty Spirit, that Divine and infallible Teacher ever present with the Church, the only agent competent to counteract its influence and counterwork its designs, is the Word of God.

Fourthly, For the moral advancement of a people there are of course required—knowledge of duty and willingness and ability to discharge it. The Word is, as I have said

already, as respects duty, the divinely appointed instrument to secure knowledge, confer willingness, and ensure ability. If any where, then, as the result either of indifference or of erroneous systems of religion, the Word be excluded from those ordained schools and educators of nations, the Family and the Church, or if any where it be superseded, the actual supremacy of enlightened conscience in the State is rendered impossible. The Social Union is, in that case, bound together only by ties of instinct and interest, bands strong enough to bear the strain of ordinary and quiet seasons, but ready to stretch and snap at the pressure of tempestuous times. 'Tis never to instinct or to interest that we can look for the steady maintenance of the social system, or the steady development of its powers. The unquestioned sovereignty of enlightened conscience in the State is a political necessity—is the very life, and strength, and harmony of society, and that alone which gives it a vivifying power that renders it indestructible. But enlightened conscience without an enlightened faith, or enlightened faith without the Word, is practically impossible. Government, without the Bible, denotes in our day only the ascendancy of passion or the sway of selfishness, unless it denote the only remaining condition of stable social equilibrium—the sovereignty of the sword. Of political progress, rational liberty, and stable dominion, the Word of God is the indispensable guarantee.

In conclusion, It is from the absence of this living and, to the well-being of society, this indispensable energy of the Word that I augur for the future of Continental nations only calamity and sorrow. The late struggle has

led, only to be renewed with undiminished destructive-
 ness on the first recurring opportunity. The present
 truce is merely an armed truce. No power or influence
 of a conciliatory character works anywhere to guarantee
 its permanence; certainly no influences of religion interpose
 to mitigate or restrain, in any degree, the impetuous passions
 that now press for ascendancy, or even to diminish the
 headth of the emergency by giving us hopes of a rising
 generation at all happier than their fathers. And, therefore,
 contemplating the future of these lands, we can regard it
 only with solemn awe, as pregnant with great calamities,
 which Divine Wisdom alone can overrule for good. There
 is nothing before us at present but the certain uprising, in
 all majesty and for a career of vengeance, of that imprison-
 ing energy that even now upheaves kingdoms when it will,
 and truly we can see in it a high moral purpose to be
 effected, for kings and people, have alike to learn that,
 when nations depart from God, His presence deserts them—
 that temporal judgments are the certain issue of national
 inobedience, and that He who holds in His hands the destinies
 of kingdoms, and metes out to nations the punishment
 of their sins, can find, in the tumultuous swellings of
 godless multitudes, as powerful an instrument of judgment
 as the earthquake or the flood. In the presence of politi-
 cal movements, unparalleled and stupendous, in which we
 ourselves may perchance be called upon to mingle, if not,
 indeed, on the very threshold of the times when the old
 had proud monarchies of Christendom, like the iron and
 clay of Daniel's image, must be broken in pieces to-
 gether, it behoves us to look to ourselves. The Bible is
 our peculiar trust, and its free examination our noblest
 privilege. Let us see, then, that we secure for it the

practical supremacy which it rightfully claims. All history has been written in vain, if we have never learned that equally with nations and individuals, "he that walketh uprightly walketh safely," but that the path of unfaithfulness to a Christian trust is the path of judgments.

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