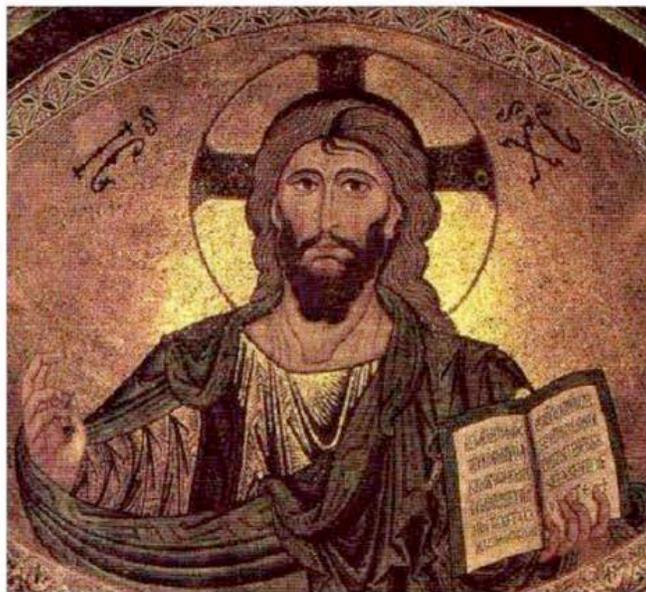


Prophecies of the Messiah Among the Gentiles



Samuel Horsley

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(Annotated)**

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Bishop of St. Asaph

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Edited and Annotated by

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Biblical Theological Seminary

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Abstract

There was a very widespread belief in the coming of a benevolent, messianic world-ruler about the time of Jesus. Why? Besides the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, the author suggests that the original promises, given to the pre-Abrahamic patriarchs, were apparently somehow transmitted down to Greco-Roman times by other channels outside the nation Israel. Using both biblical and classical materials, the author argues what form these materials may have taken.

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The Author

Samuel Horsley (1733-1806) was a British churchman (Church of England), educated at Cambridge; he served successively as Bishop of St. David's, Bishop of Rochester, and finally Bishop of St. Asaph. He was active in church affairs and in parliament, and is especially noted for his controversy with Joseph Priestly regarding the Trinity.

Bishop Horsley was quite competent in physics and mathematics; he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1767. Besides a number of papers in these areas, he wrote extensively on biblical subjects, including a number of sermons on apologetic subjects. He was noted for his easy, readable style and clear argumentation. Further information on him can be found in the article "Samuel Horsley" in *Wikipedia*.

This paper, originally entitled "A dissertation on the prophecies of the Messiah dispersed among the heathen," was taken from a collection *Nine sermons on the nature of the evidence by which the fact of our Lord's resurrection is established...*, published simultaneously in the U.S. in 1816 by three firms—one each in New York, Philadelphia and Boston—perhaps indicating something of the author's popularity. Here, the original pagination is marked by numbers in brackets in our text. The spelling and punctuation are British, and have only rarely been modified. Headings have been added for greater ease of study. The editor's annotations are given in endnotes; endnotes of the original author are marked [sh].

The Editor

Robert C. Newman (1941-) is a graduate of Duke University (BS, physics), Cornell University (PhD, astrophysics), Faith Seminary (MDiv), and Biblical Seminary (STM, Old Testament). He taught New Testament and Christian Evidences at Biblical Seminary from 1971 to 2006, and is the author of numerous papers and a few books on biblical and scientific subjects. He was the Director of the Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute from 1980 to 2009.

Introduction

THE expectation of an extraordinary person who should arise in Judea, and be the instrument of great improvements in the manners and condition of mankind, was almost if not altogether universal at the time of our Saviour's birth; and had been gradually spreading and getting strength for some time before it. The fact is so notorious to all who have any knowledge of antiquity, that it is needless to attempt any proof of it.¹ It may be assumed as a principle, which even an infidel of candour would be ashamed to deny; or if anyone would deny it, I would decline all dispute with such an adversary as too ignorant to receive conviction, or too disingenuous to acknowledge what he must secretly admit. [14] If we inquire what were the general grounds of the expectation which so generally prevailed, the answer to the question is exceedingly obvious: That the ground of this expectation was probably some traditional, obscure remembrance of the original promises. But the great point is, to discover by what means this remembrance was perpetuated in the later and darker ages of idolatry, when the name of Jehovah was forgotten, and his worship neglected, except in one nation in which the knowledge and worship of the invisible Creator was miraculously preserved.

Now my conjecture is, that this was effected by a collection of very early prophecies, which were committed to writing in a very early age, and were actually existing in many parts of the world, though little known till the extirpation of Paganism, by the propagation of the Gospel. I am well aware how extravagant such an opinion may appear in this incredulous age. But I stand not in the judgment of infidels, I speak to a Christian audience.² They will judge of the probability of my assertion, when I have stated the grounds on which I build it.

[15] For the more perspicuous arrangement of my argument I shall divide it into two parts. —

First, I shall prove the fact from historical evidence, that the Gentile world in the darkest ages was in possession, not of vague and traditional, but of explicit written prophecies of Christ. When I have established the fact, and by that means shewn the immediate cause of the expectation which so generally prevailed, I shall then produce the more remote and higher cause, and prove that these written prophecies were the remains of divine oracles of the earliest ages.

The Sibylline Oracles

First, for the fact that the Gentile world in the darkest ages was possessed of explicit written prophecies of Christ, I shall found the proof of it on the contents of a very extraordinary book, which was preserved at Rome under the name of the oracles of the Cumaean Sibyl,³ which was held in such veneration that it was deposited in a stone chest in the temple of Jupiter in the capitol, and committed to the care of two persons expressly appointed to that office. For the contents of this book I shall make no appeal to the quotations of the ancient fathers. I [16] am well persuaded that many of them were deceived, and that the verses which they produce as prophecies of Christ found in the Sibylline books, and which contain rather minute detail of the

miraculous circumstances of our Saviour's life than general predictions of his advent and his office, were scandalous forgeries. And God forbid that I should endeavour to restore the credit of an imposture that hath been long since exploded. At the same time I must observe, that though this censure be just as applied to the later fathers, yet the testimony of the earlier, of Justin Martyr in particular, and of Clemens Alexandrinus, seem deserving of more credit: Not so much for the great learning and piety of those venerable writers, for with all this they were very capable of giving too easy credit to what might seem to serve their cause; but because they lived before the age of pious frauds, as they were called, commenced,⁴ and while the Sibylline books were [17] extant; so that they might easily have been confuted by the heathens, had they alleged as quotations from those books, forged predictions which appeared not in the authentic copies. Of their evidence however I shall not avail myself; for I would build my assertion on none but the most solid ground. I shall therefore take my idea of the contents of these books entirely from the testimony of heathen writers. At least I shall make no use of any assertion even of the earliest fathers; much less shall I credit any of the quotations of the later, except so far as I find them supported by the most unquestionable heathen evidence.

Among heathen writers, I believe, it would be in vain to seek for any quotations of particular passages from the Sibylline oracles. They never made any. For, to produce the words of the Sibylline text, would have been dangerous violation of a law, by which the publication of any part of these writings was made a capital offence. We have however such representations of the general argument of the book, and of the general purport of particular prophecies, as afford a strong presumption in favour of the opinion we have advanced, that it was composed of adulterated fragments of the patriarchal [18] prophecies and records, and that put it out of doubt, that of much of the prophetic part the Messiah was the specific subject.

From the general argument of the book as it is represented by heathen writers, it is very evident that it could be no forgery of heathen priestcraft; for this reason, that it was exceedingly unfavorable to that system of idolatrous superstition, which it was the great concern and interest of the heathen priesthood to propagate and support; and this was probably the true reason that the Roman Senate committed the book to the custody of two of the Augural College,⁵ and kept it from the inspection of the vulgar by the severest laws. Now this extraordinary fact, that it was little for the interests of idolatry that the contents of the Cumaeen oracles should be divulged, we learn from a dispute which was keenly agitated at Rome, between the friends of Julius Caesar and the leader of the republican party; in the course of which a member of the Augural College in the heat of argument let the secret out.

Julius Caesar, you know, attained the height of his power within a few years before our Saviour's birth: little was wanting to his greatness but the [19] title of a king of which he was ambitious. The difficulty was to bring the Senate to confer it; for, without their sanction it was unsafe to assume it. One of his adherents thought of an expedient not unlikely to succeed. He produced a prophecy from the Cumaeen Sibyl of a king who was to arise at this time, whose monarchy was to be universal, and whose government would be necessary and essential to the happiness of the world. The artful statesman knew, that if he could once create a general persuasion upon the credit of this prophecy, that universal monarchy was to be established,

and that the state of the world required it, the difficulty would not be great to prove, that Caesar was the person of his times best qualified to wield the sceptre.

The republican party took the alarm. Tully⁶ was at that time its chief support, and his great abilities were called forth to oppose this stratagem of the dictator's faction. In his opposition to it he brings no charge of falsification against those who alleged this prophecy. He denies not that a prophecy to this effect was actually contained in the Sibylline books, to which as a member of the Augural College he had free access, and when he allowed the existence of the prophecy, he was a better politician [20] than to make the application of it to Caesar the point of controversy, and to risk the success of his opposition to the schemes of Caesar's party upon the precarious success of that particular question. Confessing the prophecy he knew it was impolitic to attempt to apply it to any but a Roman, and applying it to a Roman it had been difficult to draw it away from Caesar. He therefore takes another ground. —

Having granted that the prophecy was fairly alleged by the opposite party from the Sibylline books, he attempts to overthrow the credit of the prophecy by a general attack on the credit of the books in which it was found. He affirms that these Sibylline oracles were no prophecies. His argument is, that in the writings of the Sibyl no marks are to be found of frenzy or disorder which the heathens conceived to be the necessary state of every prophet's mind while he prophesied, because the prophets of their oracular temples affected it. But those books, he says, carried such evident marks of art and study, particularly in the regular structure of the verse, as proved that it was the work of a writer who had the natural use and possession of his faculties.

This statement of Tully's may be correct, but his conclusion is erroneous, at least it must appear so to us who take our notions of prophetic style from the [21] specimens which the Bible furnishes: for the true prophets were never impeded or disturbed in the natural use and possession of their faculties by the divine impulse. Their faculties were not disturbed, but exalted and invigorated; and in the most animated of the sacred prophecies we find, beside what might be the natural character of the prophetic style, force, elevation, and sudden transition, — we find beside, an exquisite art of composition, and a wonderful regularity of versification. However, the Roman critic having proved, as he imagined from this circumstance, that these Sibylline oracles were no prophecies, concludes his whole argument with this edifying remark: "Let us then," says he, "adhere to the prudent practice of our ancestors; let us keep the Sibyl in religious privacy; these writings are indeed rather calculated to extinguish than to propagate superstition."

This testimony is above all exception. Tully, as an augur, had free access to the book in question. It cannot be doubted that he would improve his opportunities; for he was a man of an exquisite taste, of much learned curiosity; and, with these endowments, of a very religious turn of mind. It is certain therefore that he speaks upon the best information; and he is the more to be credited, as this frank confession fell from him in the [22] heat of a political debate in which he took an interested part. And from this testimony we may conclude, that the ancient fathers, whatever judgment is to be passed upon their pretended quotations from the Sibylline books,

were not mistaken in the general assertion, that the worship of the one true God, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and of a future retribution, were inculcated in these writings; which it seems, in Tully's judgment (and a competent judge he was), were proper weapons to combat idolatry: and by what weapons may error be more successfully combated than by the truth?

If the Sibylline oracles in their general tenor were unfriendly to the interests of idolatry, it is the less to be wondered, that they should contain predictions of its final extirpation: Of this I shall now produce the evidence; still relying, not upon particular quotations, but upon the general allusions of the heathen writers.

Virgil⁷ the celebrated Roman poet flourished in the court of Augustus no long time before our Saviour's birth, when the general expectation of a person to appear who should abolish both physical and moral evil, was at the highest. [23]

Among his works still extant is a congratulatory poem addressed to a noble Roman, the poet's friend,⁸ who bore the high office of consul at the time when it was written. The occasion seems to have been the birth of some child, in whose fortunes Pollio the poet's friend was nearly interested. The compliment to Pollio is double, being partly drawn from a flattering prediction of the infant's future greatness (for it is affirmed, that he will prove nothing less than the expected deliverer), and partly from this circumstance, that the year of Pollio's consulate should be distinguished by the birth of such a child. Whoever should read this poem without a knowledge of the history of the times would conclude, that it was a compliment to Pollio upon the birth of his own son.

But it is a very extraordinary, but a very certain fact, that the consul had no son born in the year of his consulate, or within any short time before or after it. Nor will the history of these times furnish us with any child born within a moderate distance of Pollio's year of office, which, by its rank and connexion with his family, might seem of sufficient importance to be the subject of this congratulation, even when all possible allowance has been made [24] for a poet's exaggeration and a courtier's flattery. But what is most worthy of remark, and the most for my present purpose, is the description which the heathen poet gives of the extraordinary person that he expected; of his origin, his achievements, and the good consequences of his appearance; which is such, that if any illiterate person who was to hear this poem read in an exact translation, with the omission only of the names of heathen deities, and of allusion to profane mythology, which occur in a few passages, — any illiterate person who was to hear the poem read with these omissions, which would not at all affect the general sense of it, if he had not been told before that it was the composition of an heathen author, would without hesitation pronounce it to be a prophecy of the Messiah, or a poem at least upon that subject written in express imitation of the style of the Jewish prophets. The resemblance between the images of this poem and those in which the inspired prophets describe the times of the Messiah, has ever been remarked with surprise by the learned, as indeed it is much too striking to escape notice; and many attempts have been made to account for it. It has been imagined, that the poet had actually borrowed his images from the prophets. The books of the Old

Testament having been translated into [25] the Greek language long before the days of Virgil,⁹ it has been supposed, that he might have become conversant with the sacred writings in the Greek translation.

But I see no reason to believe that these books were ever in any credit among the Romans, or that the contents of them were known at all, except to some few who were proselytes to the Jewish religion.

It has been supposed, that Herod's visit at the court of Augustus might be the means of making the Roman poet acquainted with the Hebrew bards. Herod indeed was some months at Rome, but there is little probability that the king, or any of his train, had leisure to be the poet's tutor in Hebrew learning. It is very strange that in so many attempts to account for the extraordinary fact under consideration, more attention should not have been paid to the account which the poet himself has given of it. He refers to the oracles of the Cumaean Sibyl as the source from which he drew these predictions. And in this lay the whole force of his compliment to Pollio, — That the child whose future greatness was the object of Pollio's ambition would prove to be [26] that personage whom the Cumaean Sibyl had announced as a deliverer of the world from physical and moral evil: For that is the sum and substance of the character according to the poet's description. Here, then, we have the clear testimony of this heathen poet, that the oracles of the Sibyl contained a prophecy, not accomplished when he wrote this congratulatory poem to his friend, but likely to be accomplished in the rising generation, of the appearance of a very extraordinary person. We know that the Jewish prophets marked the same time for the season of the Messiah's advent.¹⁰ From the strain of the poet's compliments we gather the particulars of the Sibylline prophecy in regard to the character which it ascribes to the person whose appearance it announced; we find that this character perfectly agrees with that of the Messiah as it is drawn by the Jewish prophets; the difference being only this, that the Jewish prophecies are more circumstantial than the Sibylline.

The sum of the character is the same in both; in its nature unequivocal, and such as even in the general outline could not possibly belong to different persons in the same age. [27]

The object of the Sibylline oracle, as well as the Messiah of the Jews, was to be of heavenly extraction, — the high offspring of the gods, the great seed of Jupiter. He was to strike an universal peace, and to command the whole world; and in this universal government he was to exercise his father's virtues. He was to abolish all violence and injustice, to restore the life of man to its original simplicity and innocence, and the condition of man to its original happiness. He was to abolish the causes of violent death; and all death, considered as a curse, is violent. He was to kill the serpent, and purge the vegetable kingdom of its poisons. The blessings of his reign were to reach even to the brute creation; for the beasts of the forest were to lose their savage nature, that the ox might graze in security within sight of the lion.

It is evident, therefore, that the Jewish prophecies and the Sibylline oracles announce the same person, and of consequence, that the Sibylline oracles contained a prediction of the Messiah. Nor is it to be wondered, that the images of sacred prophecy should abound in this treasure of

the heathen temples, if it was composed of adulterated fragments of true [28] prophecies. The thing seems inexplicable upon any other supposition.

Thus it appears, that the Romans at least, in the ages of their worst idolatry, were in possession of a book which they held, though they knew not why, in religious veneration, containing explicit prophecies of Christ. An extraordinary accident recorded in history furnishes an incontestable proof that the same prophecies were extant in a very late age, in various parts of the world.

About a century before our Saviour's birth the book of the Cumaean Sibyl was destroyed by a fire which broke out in the Capitol, and consumed the temple where those writings were deposited. The Roman Senate thought it of so much importance to repair the loss, that they sent persons to make a new collection of the Sibylline oracles in different parts of Asia, in the islands of the Archipelago, in Africa, and in Sicily; for in all these parts copies, or at least fragments, of those prophecies were supposed to be preserved. The deputies after some time returned with a thousand verses, more or less, collected in different places, from which the most learned men at Rome were employed to select what they judged the [29] most authentic; and this collection was deposited to supply the loss of the original.

I have now established my fact, that from the first ages of profane history to the very time of our Saviour's birth, explicit predictions of him were extant in the Gentile world, in books which were ever holden in religious veneration, and which were deposited in their temples. The matter of these prophecies, and the agreement of the imagery of their language, with what we find in the prophecies of holy writ, is I think a sufficient argument of their divine original. Observe, I affirm not in general of the Sibylline books that they were divine, much less do I affirm that the Sibyls were women who had the gift of prophecy. I believe that they were fabulous¹¹ personages, to whom the ignorant heathens ascribed the most ancient of their sacred books, when the true origin of them was forgotten. But the existence of these imaginary prophetesses, and the authority of the writings ascribed to them, are distinct questions. Whether these books contained prophecies of Christ is a question of fact in which the affirmative is supported by the highest historical evidence. That these prophecies, wherever they might be found, could be of no other than divine original, the matter and the style of them is in my judgment an [30] irrefragable argument; when and where these prophecies were originally delivered, to whom they were addressed, and how they came to make a part of the treasure of the heathen temples, are questions which remain to be considered.

That they were drawn from the Jewish prophecies is improbable; for the books of the Cumaean Sibyl fell into the hands of the Romans, if we may credit their historians, in a very early age, when they were an obscure inconsiderable people, without any connexions in the East, and long before any part of the Old Testament was extant in the Greek language. And yet after the first settlement of the Jews in Canaan, I am persuaded that true prophets were nowhere to be found but in the Jewish church.¹² These prophecies then, that were current in the Gentile world in later ages, since they were neither forgeries of the heathen priests, nor founded on the Jewish prophecies, must have been derived from prophecies more ancient than the Jewish.

They were fragments (mutilated perhaps and otherwise corrupted), but they were fragments of the most ancient prophecies of the patriarchal ages. By what means fragments of the prophecies of the patriarchal ages might be preserved among idolatrous nations is the difficulty to be explained. [31]

To clear this question it will be necessary to consider, what was the actual state of revealed religion in the interval between the first appearance of idolatry in the world and the institution of the Jewish church by Moses.

I shall show you, that though the beginning of idolatry through man's degeneracy was earlier than might have been expected, its progress through God's gracious interposition was slower than is generally believed: That for some ages after it began, the world at large enjoyed the light of revelation in a very considerable degree: That, while the corruption was gradually rising to its height, Providence was taking measures for the general restoration at the appointed season: That the gift of prophecy was vouchsafed long before the institution of the Mosaic church: That letters being in use in the East long before that epoch, the ancient prophecies were committed to writing; and that, by the mysterious operation of that Providence which directs all temporary and partial evil to everlasting and universal good, the blind superstition of idolaters was itself made the means of preserving these writings, not pure, but in a state that might serve the purpose of preparing the Gentiles for the advent of our Lord, and maintaining a religious veneration for them. [32]

Revealed Religion between Abraham and Moses

I am then to consider what was the actual State of revealed religion, between the first appearance of idolatry in the world and the institution of the Mosaic church by Moses.

First, It is obvious that the worship of Jehovah was originally universal, without any mixture of idolatry among the sons of Adam for some time after the creation; and that it became universal again among the descendants of Noah for some ages after the flood. It is obvious, that so long as this was universal, the promises would be universally remembered; both the general promises of man's redemption, and the particular promises of blessings to certain families; and when the defection to idolatry began, these particular promises would be the means of retarding its progress, and of preserving the worship of the true God in the descendants of those to whom these promises were made, for some ages at least after the revolt of the rest of mankind.

And, on the other hand, wherever the true worship kept its ground, the promises could not sink into oblivion. Thus I conceive the promises to Abraham would for some time be remembered, not only in Isaac's [33] family, and in the twelve tribes of Arabians descending from Ishmael, but among the nations that arose from his sons by his second wife, Keturah;¹³ and these, if I mistake not, peopled the whole country that lay between the Arabian and the Persian Gulf, and occupied considerable tracts in Africa, and in the upper part of Asia near the Caspian Sea; and the memory of these promises, in all these nations, would for several ages keep the true

religion in some degree alive. So the earlier promises to Shem contained in Noah's prophetic benediction,¹⁴ would be for some time remembered among his posterity; and accordingly we find from ancient history, that the Persians, the Assyrians, and the people of Mesopotamia, the offspring of Shem, through his sons Elam, Ashur, and Aram, were among the last nations that fell into any gross idolatry.

Now if we are right in these principles, (and I think they are principles in which it is impossible to be greatly in the wrong, for the memory which I suppose of blessings promised to the head of a family, with which some degree of veneration for the Deity from whom they came and by whose providence they were to be accomplished, that is, some degree of the true religion would be inseparably connected; — the memory I say of such blessings seems but a [34] necessary effect of that complacency which men naturally feel in the notion that they have a claim, or that they stand within a probable expectation of a claim to hereditary honour and distinctions;) but if we are right in the supposition of some long remembrance of the promises, and a preservation of the true religion among the descendants of the Patriarchs to whom the promises were given, the first defection from the worship of the true God could not be universal, it could only be partial. And the effect of a partial defection would be, that all the nations whose loyalty to the Sovereign Lord remained unshaken, would take measures to resist the corruption and maintain among themselves the true worship of the true God.

Something of this kind seems to have happened early in the antediluvian world. "In the days of Enos men began to call themselves by the name of Jehovah."¹⁵ At this time pious men took alarm at the beginning of idolatry in the reprobate family of Cain, and formed themselves in a distinct party, and took a name of distinction to themselves as worshippers of the true God. They called themselves by the name of Jehovah as we now call ourselves by the name of Christ; and they probably made profession of the true religion by some public rites. [35]

As human nature is in all ages much the same, something similar is likely to have happened upon the first revival of idolatry after the flood. The measures that were used for the preservation of the true religion were likely to be some one, or all of these.

If any of the nations that adhered to the true God had in these ages the use of letters (and the use of letters in the East, I am persuaded, is of much greater antiquity than is generally supposed), they would commit to writing, and collect in books what tradition had preserved of the beginning of the world and the promises to their ancestors.¹⁶ These books would be committed to some public custody, and preserved as a sacred treasure.

That something of this kind was done, appears I think from fragments which still remain of ancient Eastern histories, which in certain particulars of the deluge, and in the dates which they assign to the rise of the most ancient kingdoms, are wonderfully consonant with the Mosaic records.

Again, the most interesting passages of the ancient history of the world, particularly the promises, they would put into verse, that they might more [36] easily be committed to

memory. It would be part of the education of the youth of both sexes and of all conditions, to make them get these verses by heart. They would be set to music and sung at certain stated festivals. That this was done (that it could hardly be omitted) is highly probable, because it was the universal practice of all the nations of antiquity to record in song whatever they wished should be long remembered, — the exploits of their warriors, their lessons of morality, their precepts of religion, and their laws. They would institute public rites, in which the history of the old world and of the privileged patriarchs in particular, would be commemorated in certain enigmatical ceremonies. In these there would be allusions to the deluge, to the ark, to the raven and the dove, to Noah's intoxication, to the different behaviour of his three sons upon that occasion, to Abraham's entertainment of his three guests from heaven, to his battle with the confederate kings, to the offering of Isaac, to the exile of Hagar and her son, and other parts of patriarchal history. That something of this kind was done, appears, I think, by manifest allusions that we find to some of these particulars in the religious rites of some ancient nations, even after they became idolaters. These institutions would perhaps in the end be the means [37] of spreading the corruption they were intended to resist. At the first they would be simple, significant, perspicuous, and of good effect; but by degrees additions would be made to them without any attention to the original meaning, for no other purpose but to add to the gaiety and splendor of the spectacle: And these improvements of the shew would be multiplied till they destroyed the significance of the symbol, and rendered the simple and instructive rite, first inconsistent, then obscure, absurd, and unintelligible, at last perhaps lascivious and obscene.

This, however, would be the consequence of a slow and gradual corruption; and I mention it only to remark, what extreme caution should be used in introducing anything into religious rites which may too forcibly strike the grosser senses, and by imperceptible degrees change public worship from an employment of the intellect into an amusement of the imagination. Our church, when she separated from the Roman communion, wisely retrenched the pomp and gaiety of shews and processions, while she retained everything that was truly majestic and might serve to elevate the mind of the worshipper. Public worship should be simple without meanness, [38] dignified without pageantry. But this by the way. I return to my subject. —

These were the means which men were likely to employ (I shall come afterwards to speak of means employed, as I conceive, by God himself); but these are means which men would be likely to employ to resist the progress of idolatry when it first began.

Written collections of traditional history, songs of high and holy argument, rites and shews of historical allusion: and these means could not but have a lasting and a great effect to preserve the true religion, in some considerable degree at least, among all the nations where they were practised; that is, not only among Abraham's descendants but in all the other branches of Shem's posterity: among the Edomites, Moabites, Arabians, Assyrians, Persians, and many other people of less note, notwithstanding that many of these in later times became the worst of idolaters.

In what age or in what country idolatry made its first appearance we have no certain information. The suspicion, I think, may reasonably fall upon Canaan, from the curse which is so

emphatically [39] pronounced upon him upon the occasion of his father's crime,¹⁷ rather than upon any other of Ham's descendants, which must have had its reason in some particular impiety in the character of Canaan himself, or of his early descendants. We have it however from the highest authority, that it prevailed in that part of Mesopotamia where the race of the Chaldeans afterwards arose, in the days of Terah the father of Abraham. For Joshua begins his last exhortation to the Israelites with reminding them, that "in old time their fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood, even Terah the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods."¹⁸ This passage puts it out of doubt that some sort of idolatry prevailed in Terah's time in his country. But it amounts not to a certain proof that Terah or any of his ancestors were themselves idolaters; for the expression, that they served, necessarily imports no more than that they lived as subjects in countries where other gods were worshipped. In this sense it is said of the Jewish people in their dispersion, they should serve other gods; and yet the Jews in their dispersions have never been idolaters. In the sequel of this same speech the service which the fathers of the Israelites, while they dwelt beyond the flood, paid to other gods, is so expressly opposed to the [40] worship of Jehovah now required of the Israelites, that little doubt can remain that the expression of serving other gods is to be taken here in its literal meaning, — that the ancestors of Abraham, and Abraham himself, before God's gracious call, were infected with the idolatry which in that age prevailed.

It is not to my present purpose to trace the progress of idolatry through all its different stages, it will be sufficient for me to shew, that for many ages the worship of the true God subsisted, though preposterously blended with the superstitious adoration of fictitious deities and even of images. Just as at this day in the church of Rome, the worship of the ever-blessed Trinity subsists in preposterous conjunction with the idolatrous worship of canonized men and inanimate relics.

When Abraham took up his abode in Gerar the chief city of the Philistine, Abimelech the king of Gerar became enamoured of his wife.¹⁹ Upon this occasion God came to Abimelech, and the motive of his coming was in mercy to Abimelech, that he might not draw destruction upon himself and upon his family by the indignity which he was upon the point of offering to Abraham's wife. From this [41] it has been with great probability concluded, that this Abimelech and the people which he governed were worshippers of God; for it is not likely that such tenderness should have been shown to a wicked prince and a wicked nation. Sarah's purity might have been preserved by other means. Nor does the humility and submission with which Abimelech receives the heavenly warning, nor the severity with which he expostulates with the patriarch for his unjust suspicion of him and his subjects, suit the character of one who feared not God.

Again, in the days of Isaac another Abimelech, the son or grandson of the former, in an interview with Isaac (the object of which was to compose some quarrels that had arisen between Isaac's herdsmen and his own subjects), tells Isaac that he saw certainly that Jehovah was with him.²⁰ That under this conviction he solicited his friendship and his peace; and he calls Isaac the Blessed of Jehovah. This is the language of one who feared Jehovah and

acknowledged his providence. In the days of Abraham therefore, and of Isaac, the worship of the true God was not yet extinguished among the idolaters of Palestine. [42]

In Mesopotamia, in the same age, the family of Nahor, Abraham's brother, was not untainted with idolatry. Laban had certain images which he calls his gods, for which it should seem that his daughter Rachel entertained some degree of veneration. Yet two occasions are recorded, upon which Laban mentions the name of Jehovah, and acknowledges his providence. The first is when he receives Abraham's steward, who came as a suitor on the part of Isaac to Rebecca;²¹ the second, when he solemnly calls Jehovah to witness the reciprocal engagements of friendship between Jacob and himself at their parting.²²

In Egypt, the great workshop of Satan, where the molten images were cast which in later ages all the world adored, — in Egypt idolatry was in its infancy (if it had at all gotten ground) in the days of Joseph. For when Joseph was brought to Pharaoh to interpret his dream, the holy patriarch and the Egyptian king speak of God in much the same language, and with the same acknowledgment of his overruling providence.²³

It may be added that this dream, though perhaps the chief end of it was the elevation of Joseph and the settlement of Jacob's family in Goshen, is some [43] argument of a care of providence for the Egyptian people; for by this merciful warning they were enabled to provide against the seven years of famine. Idolatry therefore in this country was in no advanced state in Joseph's time, and the settlement of the patriarchs there, and the rank and authority that Joseph held, must have checked its growth for some considerable period.

At the time when the Israelites went out of Egypt, that country and the land of Canaan were sunk in the grossest idolatry. The name of Jehovah was forgotten, and in the public religion no traces were remaining of his worship. And yet the examples upon record of particular persons who amid the general apostasy retained some attachment to the service of the true God, afford I think an argument, that in either country this extreme degeneracy was at that time of no very ancient date.

The two Egyptian women to whom Pharaoh committed the iniquitous business of stifling the male children of the Hebrews²⁴ in the birth "feared God," i. e. they feared the true God; for the superstitious fear of idols is never in the Scripture language called the fear of God. They feared God in that degree that they would not execute the king's [44] command; and that the true fear of God was the motive from which they acted, appears from the recompense they received: "Because the midwives feared God, God dealt well with them and made their families great and prosperous." The mixed multitude which went with Moses out of Egypt,²⁵ though not genuine Israelites, were surely in some degree worshippers of the God of Israel; for idolaters, in the proper sense of the word, would hardly have been permitted to follow the armies of the Lord. And after forty years, when the Israelites arrived at the land of Canaan, Joshua's spies found in the town of Jericho a woman who confessed that "Jehovah the God of Israel, he is God in heaven above and in the earth beneath."²⁶ And from this persuasion and in confident expectation of the execution of his vengeance on her guilty country, she entertained the

Israelitish spies and managed their escape, for which she is commemorated by St. Paul in his epistle to the Hebrews among the eminent examples of faith.²⁷

These remains of true religion which were found in Egypt and Canaan so late as the days of Moses and Joshua are I think a proof, that a total apostasy from the invisible Creator to the worship of fictitious deities as the sole managers and masters of [45] this lower world, general as it was now become, had not however long prevailed in the countries where the corruptions of idolatry were of the longest standing, and may be supposed to have made the greatest advances.

And as for the idolatry of the older and the milder sort, which retaining the worship of the true God and acknowledging his providence, added a superstitious adoration of certain inferior spirits, who were supposed to have a delegated command under the control of the Supreme over different parts of nature, from this even the chosen family itself was not always pure.

When the patriarch was to take up his abode at Bethel, the place where God appeared to him when he fled from Esau, which he considered as sanctified by God's immediate presence, we find him ordering his household to put away their strange gods;²⁸ of which they had no small variety, as appears by the sacred historian's expression, that in compliance with this injunction they gave unto Jacob all their strange gods. These were probably the idols which Rachel brought with her from Mesopotamia, with others introduced by Judah's marriage with the daughter of a Canaanite. [46]

Upon occasion of this removal to Bethel the patriarch reformed the worship of his family and his dependents and took measures to prevent an immediate revival of the corruption. He put the objects of superstitious adoration out of sight, burying the idols under an oak near Shechem. But none that is conversant with the sacred history of the Israelites can doubt, that after Jacob's death his descendants contracted a new stain, and in the later years of their sojournment in Goshen were deeply infected with the idolatry which then prevailed in Egypt, to which in the desert they discovered an attachment. The molten calf they made in Horeb was surely not the first they had worshipped.

I have now considered as I proposed the general state of religion in the world before the institution of the Jewish church. I have shewn you the seductive form in which idolatry began and the slow progress that it made; which is partly to be ascribed to the means employed by pious nations in the beginning to resist the corruption, but in much greater part, as I shall hereafter shew, to the merciful providence of God. Idolatry in that malignant form which disowns the true God, and attaches itself entirely to fictitious divinities, prevailed nowhere till some short time, perhaps a century or more before the deliverance [47] of the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage. Idolatry in its milder form, acknowledging the Supreme Providence, and retaining the fear and worship of the true God, but adding the superstitious worship of fictitious deities, prevailed everywhere from the days of Abraham, his single family excepted; insomuch that after the death of Abraham and Isaac, the chosen family itself was from time to time infected.

Now it is to be observed, that paganism in this milder form was rather to be called a corrupt than a false religion; just as at this day the religion of the church of Rome is more properly corrupt than false. It is not a false religion; for the professors of it receive, with the fullest submission of the understanding to its mysteries, the whole gospel. They fear God. They trust in Christ as the Author of salvation. They worship the three Persons in the unity of the Godhead. The Roman church therefore hath not renounced the truth, but she has corrupted it; and she hath corrupted it in the very same manner, and nearly in the same degree, in which the truth of the patriarchal religion was corrupted by the first idolaters; adding to the fear and worship of God and his Son, the inferior fear and worship of deceased men, whose spirits they suppose to be invested with some [48] delegated authority over Christ's church on earth. Now the corruption begins; so similar in kind and pretty equal in degree, the idolaters of antiquity and the papists of modern times seem much upon a footing.

Nor can I understand that these idolaters, so long as they acknowledged the providence and retained the worship of the true God, and believed in the promises to the fathers, were more separated from the church of Noah by their corruptions, than the papists now by similar corruptions, are separated from the true catholic church of Christ.

The ancient idolaters were not separated from the patriarchal church till their superstition ended in a total apostasy. The superstitions of Romanists may terminate in a similar apostasy equally complete, and then will they be equally separated from the church of Christ. And this I say not in any bitterness of zeal against those of the Roman communion, whom I maintain to be as yet a part of the great Shepherd's flock, although in danger of being lost, but merely to compare past things with present, and to show by the analogy of modern times what was the true state of religion in the world at large in the [49] middle ages of idolatry between its first rise and its last stage of a total apostasy.

When this took place the Gentile world were cut off from all communion with the worshippers of the true God by the institution of the Jewish church, from which idolaters of every degree and denomination were excluded. But in the whole intermediate period the Gentiles were nothing less than the corrupt branch of the old patriarchal church, the church of Noah and of Shem; and the family of Abraham were nothing more than the reformed part of it. Now since a church in any state of corruption short of apostasy, through God's merciful forbearance retains the privileges of a church, that is, is indulged in those advantages which God of his free mercy grants to the general society of his worshippers on earth, and for this reason, that in the merciful judgment of our heavenly Father, in his pity for the infirmities of the human understanding, nothing but the apostasy of the heart extinguishes the character of a worshipper.

The Place of Providence in This Period before Moses

I shall now inquire how far the Gentile world in the middle ages between Abraham and Moses, considered as a corrupt branch of the patriarchal church, might be in the merciful care of

Providence; what [50] means might be used on the part of God to keep up the remembrance of himself among them, by a right use of which they might have recovered the purity from which they fell, and which, though through the extreme degeneracy of mankind they prevented not a general apostasy for many ages, had a tendency however to the general restoration by raising an universal expectation of the great Restorer. And in this inquiry I shall proceed as I have done in the preceding part of my subject, by making the analogy of modern times the interpreter of ancient history.

I recur therefore to my former example, and I set out with this principle, that the church of Rome is at this day a corrupt church, — a church corrupted with idolatry; with idolatry very much the same in kind and in degree with the worst that ever prevailed among the Egyptians or the Canaanites, till within one or two centuries at the most of the time of Moses. Yet we see this corrupt, this idolatrous church of Rome, has her priests and her bishops, who, deriving in continual succession from the apostles, are true priests and true bishops, invested with the authority which by the original institutions belongs to those two orders. The priests of the corrupt church of Rome have a true authority (I speak not [51] of an exclusive authority in prejudice of the Protestant priesthood), but they have their share of the common authority of priests of the church catholic to preach the word of God, although they preach other things for which they have no authority.

They have a true authority to administer the sacraments, although they have no authority to institute new sacraments; and we doubt not, notwithstanding their presumption in preaching adventitious doctrines, and in obtruding supernumerary sacraments, that the true word preached by them, and the true sacraments administered, are accompanied with God's blessing and produce a salutary effect on the heart of the hearer.

Again, the bishops of this corrupt church have in common with the bishops of the Protestant and of the Greek churches, all the authority of the first successors of the apostles that may be supposed to subsist without the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

If they usurp rights which the inspired apostles never claimed, their just claims are not invalidated by those unwarrantable pretensions: They are to judge of the qualifications of those that would be [52] ordained: They have authority to appoint to the priest's office, and to consecrate to their own by the imposition of their hands: They are the overseers of Christ's flock. They have the power to suspend heterodox or immoral priests from the exercise of their function, and to exclude laics²⁹ of scandalous lives from the sacraments: In a word, to inflict ecclesiastical censures and penalties for ecclesiastical offences. Like other magistrates they are accountable to God for any abuse of power, but still the right of government is in their hands. In their own church and over those of their own communion they have a true episcopal jurisdiction. And this is the avowed opinion of the church of England, as it must be the opinion of all who acknowledge the divine institution of the episcopal order. For when a priest who has received his orders from a bishop of the church of Rome openly abjures the errors of that church, and declares his assent to the articles of the church of England, he becomes immediately a priest in our church without any second ordination from a Protestant bishop: As

a laic of that church who openly abjures its errors is admitted to our communion, without any second baptism by the hands of a Protestant priest. [55]

Now, since in these days the church of Rome though corrupted with idolatry, has her priests and her bishops, it may seem the less strange that the ancient patriarchal church when she became corrupted with a similar idolatry in an equal degree, should have her priests and her prophets. True priests and true prophets, though not perhaps untainted with the errors of their times; priests who offered sacrifices to the true God and had authority to accept the oblations of the laity; prophets who were commissioned to resist the prevailing corruption and to prophesy of the great redemption. That these two orders were maintained through the wonderful mercy of God in idolatrous countries, till the degeneracy came to that extreme degree that he judged it fit to separate the apostates and to put his chosen people under the safe keeping of the law, I shall now prove from the sacred records.

And first for the priests of the patriarchal church in her corrupted state.

Priests

In the days of Abraham, a prince of a Canaanitish nation, Melchizedek king of Salem, was the priest of the Most High God.³⁰ The Jews have indeed a vain tradition that this Melchizedek was the patriarch Shem. According to the chronology [54] which the Jews choose to follow, Shem might be alive at the time that Melchizedek received the tenths from Abraham. But by a truer account, which the Jews followed in more ancient times, and which was followed by all the primitive fathers of the Christian church, Shem was dead above four hundred years before Abraham was born;³¹ and if we were even to grant that he might be living in the days of Abraham, the Jews have not yet explained how he came by the kingdom which this tradition gives him in the land of Canaan. But we have it on better than rabbinical authority, on the authority of an apostle, that Melchizedek had no connexion with the family of Abraham. "He counted not his descent," saith St. Paul, "from them."³² And St. Paul's argument, as is acutely remarked by the learned Bishop Patrick, would be equally inconclusive whether Melchizedek's descent were counted from Abraham or Abraham's from him. Melchizedek therefore was neither descendant nor any ancestor of Abraham. He was, as Josephus the learned historian of the Jews candidly acknowledges, a prince of Canaan.³³

Yet was he no self-constituted usurping priest, but a priest by divine appointment and commission, as appears by the deference which Abraham paid [55] him; "For consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils."³⁴ This tenth of the spoils was no payment to Melchizedek in his temporal capacity as king of Salem for any assistance he had given Abraham in the battle; for he went out to meet him when he was returning from the slaughter of the kings. The king of Salem therefore had taken no part in the expedition; he had remained at home inactive, and went out to meet the patriarch upon his return, in the quality of God's high-priest, to pronounce God's blessing upon him, to bear his public testimony to Abraham as God's chosen servant, and to declare that it was by the immediate succour of the arm of the Most High God, whose priest he was, that

Abraham's little army had overthrown the confederate kings; and the tenths being no payment for a military service, could be nothing else than a religious offering on the part of Abraham, by which he acknowledged the protection of the Most High God, and acknowledged the authority of Melchizedek's priesthood. The divine authority of which appears again more strongly in this circumstance, that this priest Melchizedek was no less than the type of that high-priest who now standeth at God's right hand making intercession for the sins of all [56] mankind. Of his universal everlasting priesthood, the priesthood of Melchizedek was the type.³⁵

The prophet David declares the nature of Christ's priesthood, by the analogy it bears to the priesthood of Melchizedek.³⁶ And from this analogy St. Paul [in Hebrews] builds his great argument for the superiority of Christ's priesthood above the Levitical: Christ is for this reason a priest forever, because he is after the order of Melchizedek.³⁷

From all this it appears, that in the days of Abraham at least, there was a priesthood among the Canaanites of higher rank than the Levitical, and more exactly typical of the priesthood of the Son of God.

Again, in the days of Joseph we find in Egypt a Potipherah a priest of On, whose daughter Joseph married;³⁸ and in the days of Moses, a Jethro a priest of Midian, whose daughter Moses married.³⁹ It has been made a question concerning both these persons, whether they were priests at all. The doubt arises from the ambiguity of the Hebrew word, which is used in some parts of Scripture for a prince or magistrate. But it is to be observed, that not a single passage is to be found in the books of Moses where [57] it is used in these senses, except it be in these two instances. That they were both priests, was clearly the opinion of the Jews who made the first Greek translation of the Pentateuch,⁴⁰ of the Jewish historian Josephus,⁴¹ and of St. Jerome.⁴²

And if they were priests at all, they were priests of the true God, the one in Egypt in the town of On in the days of Joseph, the other among the Midianites in the days of Moses. For it is hardly creditable, that Providence should have permitted either Joseph or Moses to contract an alliance by marriage with a priest of any idolatrous temple.

Thus it appears, that the true God had an order of priests in the Gentile world down to the time of the Mosaic institution. These priests were the corrupt remains of the ancient priesthood of Noah's universal church.

Prophets

We have then, I think, found the priests of the patriarchal church in its corrupted state; let us now look for its prophets. This is a point still more material to establish than the existence of the priesthood, because it is the existence of true prophecies among idolatrous nations which is the chief subject of our inquiry; and true prophecies, that is, [58] prophecies of divine original, could not have been found among idolatrous nations, unless certain persons had lived amongst them who were gifted by the Spirit of God, and favoured with divine communications.

But of this order we have two undoubted instances, — the one in Job, the other in Balaam.

Job. Job, by the consent of the learned of all ages, was no Israelite. He was certainly of the family of Abraham; for whatever difficulties may be raised about his particular country, none will deny that it lay in some part of that region of which the whole was occupied by Abraham's descendants. He was not however of the elected branch of the family, and was probably of that stock which became at last the worst of idolaters, the Edomites. That the country in which he lived was in his time infected with an incipient idolatry, appears from the mention that he makes of the worship of the sun and moon as a crime with which he was himself untainted;⁴³ a circumstance from which he could have pretended no merit, had not the prevailing fashion of his country and his times presented a strong temptation to the crime. And as there is no mention of any other kind of idolatry in the book of Job, it is reasonable to [59] conclude that in his time the corruption had gone no greater length.

Now, that Job was a prophet is so universally confessed, that it is needless to dwell upon the proof of it. He was a prophet in the declining age of the patriarchal church, in the interval between Esau, from whom he was descended, and Moses, whose time he preceded; and he prophesied in an idolatrous country where the sun and moon were worshipped.

In this idolatrous country he prophesied of the Redeemer; and it is a circumstance that deserves particular attention, that he prophesies of the Redeemer, not without manifest allusion to the divinity of his nature, and express mention of the resurrection of the body as the effect of his redemption; — two articles of our creed which we are told with great confidence are modern innovations; whereas we find them not only in the Jewish prophets, but in far more ancient prophets of a more ancient church.

"I know," saith Job, "that my Redeemer liveth; I know that he now liveth:"⁴⁴ that is, that his nature is to live. He describes the Redeemer, [60] you see, in language much allied to that in which Jehovah describes his own nature in the conference with Moses at the bush.⁴⁵ Jehovah describes himself by his uncaused existence; Job describes the Redeemer by a life inseparable from his essence. "I know that in the latter days this ever-living Redeemer shall stand upon the earth. He shall take up his residence among men in an embodied form; God shall be manifested in the flesh to destroy the works of the Devil: He shall stand upon the earth in the latter days; in the last period of the world's existence;" which implies that this standing of the Redeemer upon the earth will close the great scheme of Providence for man's restoration. And although he shall not stand upon the "earth before the latter days, yet I know that he is MY Redeemer"; that my death, which must take place many ages before his appearance, will not exclude me from my share in his redemption. For "though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. Though nothing will be then remaining of my external person, though the form of this body will have been long destroyed, the organization of its constituent parts demolished, and its very substance dissipated, the softer part become the food of worms bred in its own putrefaction, the solid bones moldered into powder: [61] "notwithstanding this ruin of my outward fabric, the immortal principle within me shall not only survive, but its decayed

mansion will be restored. It will be reunited to a body, of which the organs will not only connect it with the external world, but serve to cement its union with its Maker. For in my flesh, with the corporeal eye, with the eye of the immortal body which I shall then assume, I shall see the divine Majesty in the person of the glorified Redeemer."

Such was the tenor of Job's prophecies, of a prophet of the Gentiles; and such was the light which God granted to the Gentile world in the first stage of its corruption. And that this light was not withdrawn till the corruption attained its height we learn from the second instance, the Aramaean prophet Balaam.

Balaam. What might be the exact degree of the degeneracy in Balaam's country, I cannot take upon me to determine. But the bordering nation, the Moabites, were addicted to that gross idolatry which made homicide and prostitution an essential part of its religious rites. From the extreme depravity of the times, and from the wickedness of Balaam's own character, it has been doubted whether he was [62] properly a prophet. It has been imagined that he might be a sorcerer, who practised some wicked arts of magical divination, and owed his fame to the casual success of some of his predictions; that those remarkable prophecies which he delivered when Balak called him to curse the Israelites, were the result of an extraordinary impulse upon his mind upon that particular occasion, and no more prove that the gift of prophecy was a permanent endowment of his mind, as it was in Job and the Jewish prophets, than the speaking of his ass upon the same occasion proves that the animal had a permanent use of the faculty of speech.

The difficulty of conceiving that true prophets should be found in an idolatrous nation, if I mistake not, I have already removed by the analogy which I have shewn to subsist between ancient and modern corruptions. The difficulty of conceiving that the gift of prophecy should be imparted to a wicked character, will be much softened, if not entirely removed, if we recollect the confessed crimes of some of the Jewish prophets, and the confessed indiscretions of some persons who shared in the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in the primitive churches. And if once we admit, as the evidence of plain fact compels us to admit, that the gift of [63] prophecy is not always in proportion to the moral worth of the character, we must confess it to be a question which is beyond the ability of human reason to decide, in what proportion they must necessarily correspond, or with what degree of depravity in the moral character the prophetic talent may be incompatible. Balaam's impiety at last ran to the length of open rebellion against God;⁴⁶ for he suggested to the king of Moab, as the only means by which the fortunes of the Israelites could be injured, the infernal stratagem of enticing them to take a part in that idolatry for which, by the tenor of his own predictions, the Moabites were destined to destruction. But this apostasy of Balaam's was subsequent to the prophecies that he delivered to Balak, and was the effect of the temptation which the occasion presented, the offer of riches and preferment in Balak's court. It is probable indeed that his heart had never been right with God, or these objects could not have laid hold of him so forcibly. But this, for anything that appears from the sacred history, might be his first act of open impiety and rebellion; and the conclusion, that in the former part of his life he had been too bad a man to be honoured with the prophetic gift, is precarious. The circumstances of the story are of far more weight than any reasoning built upon

such [64] precarious principles as man's notion of the manner in which the divine gift should be distributed; and from the circumstances of the story it appears, that he was a true prophet of the true God.⁴⁷ When Balak's messengers first came to him, he speaks the language of one who had the fear of God habitually upon his mind. He disclaims all power of his own to bless or curse, to take any step in the business but under God's express direction and permission. He must have God's leave to go to Balak; and when he comes to Balak, he must take heed to speak what Jehovah puts into his mouth. Although Balak would give him his house full of silver and gold, he could not transgress the word of Jehovah his God, to do less or more. This was his language in the ordinary state of his mind, when he was under no prophetic impulse; and it is remarkable that he speaks of God in the same terms which were afterwards in use among the Jewish prophets; "Jehovah my God," "Jehovah, the God whose prophet am I." In ecstasy he expresses the same sentiments in a more figured language. He describes his own faculty of prediction in images the most exactly expressive of the prophetic gifts and the prophetic office; expressive of no singular unexampled impulse upon this occasion, but of [65] frequent and habitual intercourse with the Most High God, by voice and visions, in dream and in trance.

It is very remarkable, that in the strain of these predictions there is no indication of that violent constraint which some have imagined upon the mind of the speaker, or that he was more a necessary agent than any other prophet under the divine impulse. In every instance of prophecy by divine inspiration, thoughts and images were presented to the prophet's mind by the inspiring Spirit, which no meditation or study of his own could have suggested; and therefore the mind of the man under this influence might properly be considered as a machine in the hand of God. Yet the will of the man in this, as in every instance in which man acts under the control of Providence, seems to have been the spring by which the machine was put in motion.

And though in conceiving the prophecy the man was passive, in uttering it he was a free and voluntary agent; which appears from this circumstance, that the prophet had it in his choice to dissemble and prevaricate, to utter smooth things and to prophecy deceits. And this was Balaam's situation when he tells Balak's messengers that he cannot go beyond the word of Jehovah his God; that what God should [66] put in his mouth, that he must speak. It is not that his organs of speech were not upon these occasions in his own command, that they were determined by some other principle than his own will to the utterance of certain words which might convey certain thoughts, but that he had no power of uttering true predictions, of pronouncing either blessing or curse that might prove effectual, otherwise than as he spake in conformity to the divine motions; and the alacrity and ardour of his prophetic strains indicate a satisfaction and complacency of his own mind in uttering its conceptions.

There is one passage in his second song, which as it lies in the English Bibles may seem to contradict this assertion: "Behold I have received commandment to bless, and he hath blessed, and I cannot reverse it,"⁴⁸ Which may seem to say, that if he could, he would have reversed the blessing. But the original, according to the reading of the best manuscripts, expresses a very different sentiment: "Behold, to bless was I brought hither, (brought, not by Balak's invitation but by God), to bless was I brought hither. I will bless, and I will not decline it." And the same

sense appears in the Greek translation of the Septuagint; and accordingly he pronounces his blessing without reserve or [67] reluctance. He discovers no unwillingness to paint the prosperity of the Jewish nation in the highest colours, no concern for the calamities that awaited their enemies; and in his last effusions his mind seems to enjoy the great scene that was before him, of the happiness and glory of the Messiah's reign, and the final extermination of idolaters.

Another circumstance to be remarked is, that no traces of idolatrous superstition or magical enchantment appear in the rites which were used upon this occasion. We read indeed, that after the third sacrifice "he went not as at other times to seek enchantments."⁴⁹ Some have taken alarm at the word enchantments, taking it in a bad sense. No conclusion can be drawn from a passage so obscure, as all who are versed in the Hebrew language must confess this to be in the original. The words which are rendered "as at other times," seem not to allude as these English words should do, to something that had been Balaam's ordinary practice upon former occasions, but to what he had done before upon this occasion. "He went not as from time to time before," or "he went not as he had done once and again, to seek enchantments." What these enchantments might be which he went to seek, since it cannot be determined by the mere force of the [68] word "enchantments" may be best conjectured by considering what Balaam had done once and again upon the present occasion.

Now once and again after each of the first sacrifices he retired to a solitary place.⁵⁰ And what sought he in this retirement? What he sought may be divined by what he met with. He met God, and God put a word in his mouth; and this the third time Balaam did not. He stayed with Balak and the Moabitic chiefs in the place where the third sacrifice had been performed, patiently waiting the event, with his face toward the wilderness, where the Israelite army lay encamped.⁵¹ These enchantments, therefore, which once and again he went to seek, and which the third time he sought not, were as it should seem no idolatrous or magical enchantments, but either some stated rites of invocation of the inspiring spirit which he practised in retirement, or, as I rather think, some sensible signs by which, in the early ages of the world, God was pleased to communicate with his prophets; some voice or vision. His preparatory rite was, that in each place where he took his station he directed the king of Moab to make seven altars, and to offer seven bullocks and seven rams. In this there is nothing of idolatry, but every circumstance is characteristic of a solemn [69] sacrifice to the true God. The altars were raised expressly for the particular purpose of this sacrifice. He used no altar that was ready made, lest it should have been profaned by offerings to the idols of the country. And being raised in a hurry upon the spot, they could not be durable or stately erections of workmanship and art (such altars as the Israelites were permitted to erect), but simple mounds of earth, or heaps of unpolished stone, which could not long remain after they had served the present solemn business, to be afterwards profaned by idolatrous sacrifices.

Some have suspected something of idolatrous superstition in the number of the altars and of the victims. On the contrary I am persuaded, that the choice of the number seven was a solemn and significant appropriation of the offerings to the Supreme God the Maker of the world. The last business in the book of Job, when the great argument between Job and his friends is

brought to a conclusion, is a solemn sacrifice, not devised by Job or any of his friends, but prescribed by the express voice of God. And this sacrifice like Balaam's consists of seven bullocks and of seven rams.⁵² It should seem therefore, that in the earliest ages it was a characteristic rite of the pure patriarchal worship to [70] sacrifice on occasions of great solemnity by sevens. The key to this rite is the institution of the Sabbath. The observance of the seventh day was the sacrament of the ancient church; of that church, which was more ancient than the Jewish; of that priesthood, which was more dignified than Aaron's; of the church of Adam before the flood; of the church of Noah after it. For the same reason that the seventh day was sanctified, the victims bled by sevens; and to sacrifice seven rams or seven bullocks at a time, was to declare that the offering was made to that God who created the world in six days, and to whose service the seventh day was therefore consecrated. Upon the same principle it was that much of the Jewish ritual was governed by the number seven. The golden candlestick had seven branches supporting seven burning lamps.⁵³ When atonement was to be made for the sin of a priest or of the congregation, the vail was to be sprinkled seven times with the blood of the offering,⁵⁴ and the mercy-seat was to be sprinkled seven times on the great day of annual expiation.⁵⁵ The festivals of the Jews were celebrated each for seven days successively, and among the extraordinary sacrifices of each day were seven or twice seven lambs. When the ark of the covenant was brought from the house of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem, the sacrifice [71] on that great occasion was seven bullocks and seven rams.⁵⁶ Perhaps in a much later age than Balaam's the number of his altars and his victims would have afforded no certain character of a pure worship; for in the later ages of idolatry we find a superstitious veneration for the number seven among the heathens. But thus it is with all ceremonies, that their significance depends upon the interpretation which custom makes of them. And the interpretation of the same ceremony will be different, according to the different state of opinions in different countries and at different times. Hence what was originally an act of pure devotion, may become in later times a superstitious rite. The stone which Jacob erected at Bethel became afterwards an occasion of idolatry. So to offer animals by sevens was no longer an appropriation of the sacrifice to the invisible Creator, when it could no longer be understood to allude to that particular circumstance in the creation, that it was finished in six days. And to this no allusion could be understood where the circumstance itself was not remembered. But this hinders not but that in the days of Balaam, who lived within a century of Job, the same ceremonies had the same meaning in Balaam's worship as in Job's; and that the number of his altars and his victims was a circumstance which in that age gave [72] a public character to his sacrifice, by which Balak and his princes, and the confederate armies of Moab and Midian, might understand that it was offered in contempt of their idols, and in honour of the God who rested from the business of creation on the seventh day.

Now, when all these circumstances are put together; the age of Balaam, that he lived within a century after Job; his country, which was in the neighbourhood of Job's, — part at least of a tract which was occupied by descendants of Abraham or by collateral branches of the family; his open acknowledgment of Jehovah as his God; that both in his ordinary state of mind and under the divine impulse, he refers his prophetic talent to the inspiration of Jehovah; that he disclaims any power of his own to bless or to curse, otherwise than as the interpreter of the counsels of Heaven; that he practises no magical enchantments, but offers sacrifices to God

after the patriarchal rites; that in uttering his predictions he appears not to have been more a necessary agent than every other prophet: when to all these circumstances we add, that he uttered a true prophecy, a prophecy extending, if I read its meaning aright, from his own time to the Messiah's second advent; a prophecy which in every part [73] which relates to times which are now gone by, hath been fulfilled with wonderful exactness, and in other parts which relate to ages yet to come, harmonizes with the predictions of the Jewish prophets and of the Apocalypse; — can a doubt remain, that the man who to all secondary characters of a prophet added this great character, that by a divine impulse, as is confessed, he delivered a prophecy of things too distant to fall within any man's natural foresight; a prophecy which the world hath seen in part accomplished, and which in its other parts resembles other prophecies not yet accomplished, but confessedly divine; a prophecy, which for the variety of its composition in its various parts, for the aptness, the beauty, the majesty, the horror of its images, may compare with the most animated effusions of the Hebrew bards; can a doubt remain whether this man, with all the imperfections of his private character, was a true prophet?

I am not ignorant that Origen and other divines of ancient and modern times have been unwilling to acknowledge his pretensions. If their authority should seem to outweigh the evidence drawn from the particulars of his story, I have a greater authority to produce against them, the authority of an inspired apostle. "The dumb ass," saith St. Peter, [74] alluding to Balaam's story, "the dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, forbad the madness of the "prophet";⁵⁷ acknowledging him you see for a prophet, though, for the folly of loving the wages of unrighteousness, he calls him mad.

Balaam therefore was a prophet; for with the evidence of facts and the authority of an inspired apostle on our side, we will be confident in the assertion, though Origen and Calvin be against us. Balaam was a prophet. He lived in an age of gross idolatry, and prophesied to idolaters. In him, as I conceive, the prophetic order without the pale of the Mosaic church, which was now formed, was extinguished; for I find no traces in history, sacred or profane, of a true prophet out[side] of Israel after the death of Balaam.⁵⁸ He fell you know in the general carnage of the Midianites,⁵⁹ and was himself among the first instances of God's vengeance on apostates. It is probable therefore that the prophecies which he delivered at Shittim were the last that were addressed to the old patriarchal church, now corrupt in the extreme, and on the verge of dissolution. It is remarkable that this church should be admonished by the last words of her last prophet of the impending vengeance, as the Jewish church by a greater prophet within a few years of her dissolution was [75] admonished of her fate.⁶⁰ It is remarkable that this last call of God to that apostatizing church should be the first occasion, upon record at least, upon which the Messiah is described in images of terror, as a warlike prince reducing the world by conquest, and putting his vanquished enemies to the sword.⁶¹ With these predictions of the Messiah, (predictions which by all expositors, Jews as well as Christian, by Rabbis of later times as well as by the more candid and more knowing Jews of earlier ages, are understood of the Messiah), with these predictions Balaam intermixes many brief but eloquent assertions of the first principles of natural religion: — The omnipotence of the Deity, his universal providence, and the immutability of his counsels. And, to be a standing monument of these great truths, he

leaves a very general but very exact prediction, of the fortunes of the empires and kingdoms that were at that time the most considerable, and of those that in succeeding ages were successively to arise and perish in their turns. And his images bear all the analogy to those of later prophets, of Daniel in particular, and the sublime author of the Apocalypse, which the language of a general sketch can bear to that of a minute detail. And the names and epithets which he applies to the Supreme Being are the very same which are used by Moses, Job, and the [76] inspired writers of the Jews; namely, God, the Almighty, the Most High, and Jehovah; which is a proof, that gross as the corruptions of idolatry were now become, the patriarchal religion was not sufficiently forgotten, for its language to be grown obsolete.

In this Balaam set the sun of prophecy in the horizon of the Gentile world; and yet a total night came not. For some ages a twilight glimmered in their sky, which gradually decayed and became at last almost insensible, but began to brighten again during the captivity of the Jews under the Babylonian monarchs, and from that period continued to gather strength, till at length the morning star took its station over the stable at Bethlehem. The sun of righteousness arose to set no more, and the light again was clear and universal.

You will recollect what I advanced as a probable conjecture in a former part of these disquisitions, that upon the first appearance of idolatry, when the uninfected part of mankind would be taking all means to check the progress of the contagion, the traditional history of the creation, the deluge, and the promises to the first patriarchs, which at that time would probably be pretty perfect, would be [77] committed to writing. We may assert, I think, with more certainty, that the prophecies of Job and Balaam, and of other prophets of that period, if any other existed, (and many might, although their works and their very names have been long since forgotten); it is more certain, I say, of the prophecies of these ages, that they would be committed to writing, than of the earlier traditions. For that letters were older than the beginnings of idolatry cannot be proved, though in my opinion it is more probable than the contrary. Whereas it is certain, not only that the Israelites had letters before the law, but that books and writing were in use in the days of Job in that part of the country where Job and Balaam lived; and if in use in the days of Job, certainly not out of use in the later days of Balaam. For although religion in these ages was upon the decline, arts and sciences were in a stage of progress and advancement. — That Balaam's prophecies, at Shittim in particular, were committed to writing among the Moabites and the Midianites, is, I think, incontestable. For to the Moabites and the Midianites they were delivered, not within hearing of the Israelites. And how did Moses, who heard them not, come by the knowledge of them, unless it were that they were committed to writing, and that the books of the Moabites or the Midianites fell into the [78] conquerors hands? Moses, it is true, was an inspired writer, which may seem to some to account sufficiently for his knowledge of everything he relates.

But God, even in the more immediate interpositions of his providence, acts by natural means and second causes, so far as natural means and second causes may be made to serve the purpose. The influence, therefore, of the inspiring Spirit on the mind of an historian, can be nothing more than to secure him from mistake and falsity, by strengthening his memory, and by maintaining in his heart a religious love and reverence for truth, that he may be incapable of

omission through forgetfulness, and may be invincibly fortified against all temptations to forge, conceal, disguise, or prevaricate. That inspiration ever was the means of conveying the first knowledge of facts to an historian's mind, is a very unreasonable supposition. It is to suppose an unnecessary miracle. For a miracle is always unnecessary where natural means might serve the purpose. And the supposition of an unnecessary miracle is always an unreasonable, and indeed a dangerous supposition. Unreasonable, because no evidence can prove it, and no plausible argument can be alleged for it; dangerous, because it leads [79] to an unlimited and pernicious credulity. We conclude, therefore, that Balaam's prophecies at Shittim were committed to writing by the people to whom they were delivered, because they are recorded by the inspired historian, to whom they were not delivered, who could not by any other means have come to the knowledge of them, and who, by virtue of his inspiration, was incapable of the dishonest act of forging facts of which he had no knowledge. But further, it appears from another inspired writer of the Jewish church, that other authentic accounts of Balaam's prophecies at Shittim, besides that which Moses had transmitted, was current among the Jews in a very late age, which contained some particulars which Moses, as foreign to the subject of his history, has omitted. Moses has preserved the public predictions which related to the fortunes of the Israelites and their adversaries in all ages, and to the universally interesting subject of the Messiah.

These other accounts contained the particulars of a private conference between Balaam and Balak, in which the idolatrous king inquires of God's prophet, in what way he the king might make expiation for his offences. "Remember, O my people," saith the prophet Micah [6:5], "what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered [80] him, from Shittim unto Gilgal." And then he relates the conference. The word remember evidently refers the Israelites of Micah's time to some account of this conference which they might remember, which they ought to have held in remembrance. Which account, in the judgment of Micah, who thus solemnly appeals to it, was authentic, and we must believe it to be authentic upon the credit of Micah's inspiration. Now what could this be but some written records of the prophecies at Shittim transmitted from the times of Balaam, which must have come to the Israelites, as the other account came to them, from the original books of the Moabites ?

Balaam's prophecies at Shittim therefore were committed to writing among the people to whom they were first delivered. If these prophecies, why not earlier prophecies of Balaam's? For that these were not the first and only prophecies, appears from the reputation he held as a prophet when the war between Balak and the Israelites broke out.

Earlier Written Prophecies?

If Balaam's prophecies, why not those of earlier prophets? The idolatry of the age in which they lived would not prevent it; for idolatry is always superstitious, and superstition would receive without distinction whatever went under the name of a [81] prophecy, especially if the style in which it was conceived might at all suit with its pretensions. Accordingly we find, that idolaters were not at all deficient in their veneration for the true prophets. It was rather their error, that

without distinguishing between the true prophet and the false, they entertained an extravagant respect for both, ascribing to them not only a foresight, but a command of futurity. This unreasonable belief in the prophet, not as the messenger, but as the assessor of the gods, sharing their power rather than declaring their will, was itself a branch of idolatry, even when the true prophet was the object of it. But the consequence of this superstition would be, that all prophecies, true and false, would be promiscuously recorded. At first perhaps while idolatry, in Shem's family at least, was the crime of individuals only, and the true worship of God had the support of the civil magistrate; (and in the country where Job and Balaam lived, the first public defection must have taken place in the interval between Job and Balaam; for in Job's time the first and mildest species of idolatry, the worship of the sun and moon, was an iniquity punished by the judge). While this state of things continued prophecies would be added from time to time, as they were delivered, to those earlier collections of sacred history, which, if our conjecture be admitted that [82] they existed, would probably be in the custody of the priests.

If no collections of history of the antiquity we have supposed existed, the first prophecies that were committed to writing would form a sacred volume, which unquestionably would be committed to the care of the priests, whose office it would be to add to it from time to time any later prophecies that might seem of sufficient importance to be registered in the archives of the church; for this is agreeable to what we find to have been in later ages the universal practice of all nations.

Among all nations certain books, from the supposed authenticity of early records and pretended oracles which they contain, have been holden in religious veneration; and these have ever been preserved in the temples under the care of the priests, who from time to time have added such new matter as to themselves and the civil rulers might seem of sufficient moment to challenge a place in these sacred registers. We have an instance of this practice among God's people; for when Joshua, some little time before his death, by his last pathetic exhortation to the general assembly of the tribes of Israel, had brought the people to a solemn renewal of their [83] vows of obedience to Jehovah, he wrote the story of the whole transaction in the book of the law of God. He added this narrative to the sacred volume of the law, which, by Moses's express command, was deposited in the sanctuary on one side of the ark of the covenant. Now, while the priests and the magistrates were themselves free from any idolatrous taint, the sacred books in their custody would suffer no willful corruption. But when the keepers of these books became themselves infected with idolatrous superstition, they would not lose their veneration for writings which had long been esteemed divine, nor would they be so hardy as to destroy any part of the original deposit, or even to make any considerable alterations in the text, however unfavourable it might be to the new system in the interests of which they were now engaged. The contrariety would not be perceived, nor would such measures be taken to abolish it. Priestcraft indeed is politic and daring, but simple superstition is both timid and indiscreet. Priestcraft was the growth of later ages, and the consequence of a further corruption. For priestcraft, which is a cunning management of the superstitions of the people for the temporal advantage of the priesthood, supposes a priesthood itself free of superstition, and was never known in the world till the Gentile priests of [84] sincere idolaters (if the expression may be allowed) became infidels. Simple superstition

was the first stage of the corruption among priests, no less than laics; and simple superstition hath no freedom in the pursuit of ends, no determination in the choice of means, but is the slave of fear and habit.

Habit therefore previously formed would for some time preserve a respect for the records of the ancient church, when the pure religion was forsaken. And while this habit operated, fear would prevent any corruptions of them by willful mutilation, changes, or erasures. They would be liable however to a corruption of another kind. The priests receiving false oracles with no less veneration than the true, and zealous for the credit of superstitious rites of worship, would make large additions of fable to the historic part, and of feigned predictions of impostors to the prophetic. Still the original true history and true prophecy, would be preserved, and, blended with the false, would, from age to age, while the corruption lasted, be carefully laid up under the care of the priests, and make a part of the treasures of the heathen temples.

Nor is the strange mixture of sense and absurdity, of rational religion and impious superstition, which appear in the lives and opinions of the wiser heathens, to be traced with equal probability to any other source.

The purest morals in the ordinary life, joined with obscene and impious rites of worship; a just notion of the moral attributes of the Deity, accompanied with a belief in the subordinate power of impure and cruel daemons; a clear understanding of the nature of the human mind as an immaterial substance and a voluntary agent, connected with a persuasion of the influence of the stars on the affairs of men, not only in the revolutions and commotions of empires, but on the private fortunes of every individual. These were the inconsistencies, not only of the popular creed and the popular practice, but of the creed and of the practice of the wisest and the best of their philosophers. Socrates himself, pure as his morality and sublime as his theology were, so far as the supreme God was their object, worshipped the gods of his country according to the established rites.⁶²

Now, how may we account for these contradictions in the opinions, and these inconsistencies in [86] the conduct of wise and conscientious men? For such, it must be confessed, many of the heathen philosophers were, notwithstanding the abuse which is sometimes so liberally bestowed upon them by ignorant declaimers. Whence was it, that the same men should practise rational devotion in the closet, and come abroad to join in a rank superstition? That they should form themselves to the general habits of sobriety and temperance, and yet occasionally partake of the indecent liberties of a Greek festival? Unless it was that they found the principles of true religion and the rites of an idolatrous worship established on what appeared to them the same authority, upon the credit of their sacred books, in which both were alike inculcated; books, to which they could not but allow some authority, at the same time that they had no certain means of distinguishing the authentic part from later and corrupt additions. Be that as it may, whether this might be the true source of that inconsistency of principle and practice, which was so striking in the lives of virtuous heathens, and is really a phenomenon in the history of mankind, (which I mention, only because it affords a collateral argument for the truth of perhaps the only supposition by which it may be satisfactorily

explained: the existence of such books as I have described, composed of fable joined with [87] true history, and of false prophecies of great antiquity added to more ancient predictions of God's true prophets), will hardly bear a doubt. Since it is the necessary consequence of principles which cannot reasonably be disputed, that in early ages the worshippers of the true God would use all means to preserve the memory of the first revelations, and that the first idolaters retaining a blind veneration for these ancient collections, when they no longer knew the real importance of them, would not be less careful to preserve the false oracles in which they equally believed. If such books existed, it cannot bear a doubt that they made the groundwork of all the idolatrous worship of later ages, and together with the corruption, were the means of perpetuating some disguised and obscure remembrance of true prophecies. So wonderfully hath Providence over-ruled the follies and the crimes of men, rendering them the instruments of his own purpose, and the means of general and lasting good. It was to the remains of these books which I have shewn you to have been in fact the corrupted and mutilated records of the patriarchal church, that the Greek philosophers were probably indebted for those fragments of the patriarchal creed, from which they drew the just notions that we find scattered in their writings, of the immortality of the soul; a future [88] retribution, the unity of the divine substance, and even of the trinity of persons. For of this the sages of the Pythagorean and Platonic schools had some obscure and distorted apprehensions. And to no other source can we refer the expectation that prevailed in the heathen world at large, of a great personage to arise in some part of the East for the general advantage of mankind.

And in this I think you will now agree with me, if you bear in mind the fact that I set out with proving from historical evidence, that certain books which were preserved as a sacred treasure in the heathen temples, contained explicit prophecies of Christ; which are more likely to have been ancient prophecies preserved in the manner I have described, though not without a mixture of corruption, for which too I have accounted, than the involuntary effusions of the impostors of later ages, occasionally uttering true predictions under a compulsive influence of the divine Spirit: an opinion which, I am persuaded, would never have been adopted, had not the severe notions that too long prevailed of an original reprobation of the greater part of mankind, made men unwilling to believe that heathens could be in possession of the smallest particle of true prophecy, and of course cut off all inquiry after the means by which [89] it might be conveyed to them. Besides that, in all questions of difficulty, as this must be confessed to be, men are apt rather to consult their ease, by taking up with the first plausible solution their invention may devise, than to submit to the labour of an accurate investigation of facts, and a circumspect deduction of consequences. The fact, however, that books were preserved in the heathen temples which contained true prophecies of Christ, rests, as I have shown you, upon the highest historical evidence. Nor does it rest alone upon the contents of those books which were preserved at Rome under the name of the Oracles of the Cumaean Sibyl; the same perhaps might be established by another work, which was of no less authority in the East, where it passed for the work of Hystaspes,⁶³ a Persian Magus of high antiquity. I forbear however to exhaust your patience by pushing the inquiry any farther, and shall now dismiss the subject by cautioning you, not to take alarm at the names of a Sibyl or a Magus. I assert, not that any of the fabled Sibyls of the old mythology uttered true prophecies, but that some of the prophecies which were ascribed to Sibyls were true prophecies, which the ignorant heathens

ascribed to those fabulous personages, when the true origin of them was forgotten. For Hystaspes, I will not too confidently assert that he was [90] not the compiler of the writings which were current under his name; but I conceive he was only the compiler from originals of high authority. And a Magus, in the old sense of the word, had nothing in common with the impostors that are now called magicians. The Magi were wise men who applied themselves to the study of nature and religion. The religion of the Persians in the latest age that can be given to Hystaspes, if it was at all tainted with idolatry, was only tainted in the first degree. And even in much later times Eastern Magi were the first worshippers of Mary's holy Child; which should remove any prejudice the name of a Magus might create.

Afterword by the Editor

Our author Samuel Horsley notes in the biblical accounts the appearance of Gentiles who worshiped the God of the Bible in early times, such as Melchizedek, Job, Jethro, and Balaam, each apparently independent of contact with Israel. He suggested this is due to the survival of knowledge of the true God, probably in the form of written materials, though these later became thoroughly corrupted with the spread of idolatry and polytheism. Even so, he believes that some of this material survived in the authentic *Sibylline Oracles*, and possibly other works, so that we hear about these as late as the Greco-Roman period.

Others, noting some of the same phenomena, have offered alternative explanations. In the nineteenth century, Frances Rolleston argued that the classic forty-eight constellations of the Greek sphere gave a pictorial, prophetic overview of salvation history in her work *Mazzaroth* (1863). This was popularized by Joseph Seiss in his *Gospel in the Stars* (1882) and by E. W. Bullinger in his *Witness of the Stars* (1893).

More recently, C. S. Lewis has suggested that God bore testimony to the ancient pagans (and later) through both morality and mythology, giving an overview in the chapter "History's Words" in his allegory *Pilgrim's Regress* (1933) and his novel *Till We Have Faces* (1956). Missionary Don Richardson has made a similar argument for "redemptive analogies" among modern unreached peoples in his books *Peace Child* (1976), *Lords of the Earth* (1977), and *Eternity in Their Hearts* (1981).

Each of these proposals has attractions and problems. Our author's proposal is attractive, is consistent with the biblical record, and explains the striking features mentioned in Virgil's *Eclogue 4*; one would wish for more surviving evidence. The "gospel in the stars" is likewise attractive, and its explanations of some of the constellations are impressive; but allegorizing is deceptively easy, the dates of the star names used are uncertain, and if E. W. Maunder is correct in his *Astronomy of the Bible* (1908), the 48 classic constellations may have originated as late as 2700 BC. Lewis and Richardson's proposals are also attractive and impressive, but their evidence seems largely anecdotal.

I would suggest, for those who find one or more of these proposals intriguing, that you do some further research, and see what you can turn up.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, "The Deified Vespasian," 4.5; Tacitus, *Histories*, 5.13 Josephus, *Jewish War*, 6.5.4.

² So, throughout, the author will be addressing Christians, assumed to be Bible-believing, rather than atheists, agnostics, or Christians who have a lower view of the reliability of Scripture.

³ The Cumaean Sybil was the priestess who presided over the oracle of Apollo at Cumae, a Greek colony located near Naples in Italy. See the article "Cumaean Sybil" in Wikipedia.

⁴ [sh] It is remarkable, however, that Celsus charged the Christians of his time with interpolating the Sibylline books. Origen challenges him to support the accusation by specific instances of the fraud, and insinuates that the most ancient copies of those books had the passages which Celsus esteemed insertions of the Christians. *Contra Celsum*, book 7, chapter 56.

⁵ An augur was a priest in ancient Rome, who studied the flight of birds to determine the will of the gods, a procedure done whenever any important decision was made.

⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) is better known to us by his name Cicero.

⁷ Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 BC) is the Roman poet best known as the author of the poem the *Aeneid*, the Latin epic which functions as Rome's equivalent to Homer's *Odyssey*. Here our author will be referring to his *Eclogues* or *Bucolics*, of which the 4th *Eclogue* is often called the "Messianic Eclogue."

⁸ Virgil's fourth Eclogue was addressed to Asinius Pollio.

⁹ It is generally agreed that the so-called Septuagint version of the Old Testament in Greek had been completed before about 130 BC.

¹⁰ As, for instance, the prophecy of Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" in Dan 9:24-27. See my paper *The Time of the Messiah*, IBRI Research Report #9, available from Amazon.

¹¹ That is, fictional.

¹² The author will discuss this later, under his remarks about [Balaam](#).

¹³ See Genesis 25:1-4.

¹⁴ See Genesis chapter 9.

¹⁵ See Genesis 4:26.

¹⁶ Something of this sort has been suggested for Genesis, that the various sections were originally written long before Moses by various of the patriarchs. See P. J. Wiseman and D. J. Wiseman, *Ancient Records and the Structure of Genesis* (Nelson, 1985).

¹⁷ See Genesis 9:20-27.

¹⁸ See Joshua 24:2.

¹⁹ See Genesis chapter 20.

²⁰ See Genesis 26:26-31.

²¹ See Genesis chapter 24.

²² See Genesis 30:43-55.

²³ See Genesis chapter 41.

²⁴ See Exodus 1:15-21.

²⁵ See Exodus 12:38.

²⁶ See Joshua 2, especially verse 11.

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- ²⁷ See Hebrews 11:31.
- ²⁸ See Genesis 35:1-5.
- ²⁹ That is, laity, common members of the church, not clergy (pastors, priests, bishops).
- ³⁰ See Genesis 14:18-20.
- ³¹ This is the difference between the chronology deduced from the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Greek Septuagint text. See William Henry Green, "Primeval Chronology" in *Genesis One and the Origin of the Earth*, available as a Kindle e-book from Amazon; this paper has also been reprinted elsewhere.
- ³² See Hebrews 7:1-10, especially verses 5-6.
- ³³ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.10.2, who calls him "king of the city Salem."
- ³⁴ See Hebrews 7:1-10, especially verse 4.
- ³⁵ See Hebrews 7:11-28.
- ³⁶ See Psalm 110:4.
- ³⁷ See Hebrews 7:1-10:18.
- ³⁸ See Genesis 41:50.
- ³⁹ See Exodus 2:15-22.
- ⁴⁰ See the relevant passages, where the word is translated *hiereus*, "priest."
- ⁴¹ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 2.11.2.
- ⁴² Presumably, the author is referring to Jerome's Vulgate, which gives *sacerdos*, "priest."
- ⁴³ See Job 31:26-28.
- ⁴⁴ See Job 19:23-29, especially verse 25.
- ⁴⁵ See Exodus 3:1-15, especially verses 13-14.
- ⁴⁶ The account of Balaam is primarily found in Numbers chapters 22 to 24; his advice to Balak is not mentioned in this context, though its results are narrated in Numbers 25; this rebellion is mentioned in an offhand way in Numbers 31:8 and Joshua 13:22, and referred to in 2 Peter 2:15 and Revelation 2:14.
- ⁴⁷ See also the discussion of Balaam in Allan A. MacRae, *Old Testament History IV: In the Wilderness*, available as a Kindle e-book from Amazon.
- ⁴⁸ See Numbers 23:20.
- ⁴⁹ See Numbers 24:1.
- ⁵⁰ See Numbers 23:3-4, 15-16.
- ⁵¹ Numbers 24:1-2.
- ⁵² See Job 42:7-8.
- ⁵³ See Exodus 37:17-22.
- ⁵⁴ For example, Leviticus 4:6, 17.
- ⁵⁵ Leviticus 16, especially verses 14-15.
- ⁵⁶ See 1 Chronicles 15, especially verse 26.
- ⁵⁷ See 2 Peter 2:15-16.
- ⁵⁸ Note this is an argument from silence, though it may be correct. There is no explicit indication of this in scripture.
- ⁵⁹ Numbers 31:8; Joshua 13:22.
- ⁶⁰ For example, Jesus' woes pronounced upon Israel in Matthew 23.
- ⁶¹ See Numbers 24:14-25.

⁶² [sh] That he died a martyr to the doctrine of the unity of the divine substance, is a vulgar error.

⁶³ Hystaspes is the Greek rendering of the Persian name Vishtaspa. There is uncertainty on whether this individual actually existed, but he was alleged to be an associate and patron of Zoroaster. There is likewise uncertainty about his date, some putting it in the 10th century BC or even earlier. The Oracles of Hystaspes survive only in resumés in Greek and Latin, with a variety of opinions on their nature and date. For further information, see the article "Hystaspes, Oracles of" in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* at <http://iranicaonline.org/hystaspes-oracles-of>, and the article "Vishtaspa" in Wikipedia.