

BIBLE BIOGRAPHY.

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As it is not our province to reconcile the conflicting opinions of these divines, as to the fact, whether the supposed impossibility or absurdity involved in our dilemma, may or may not be taken as an element of interpretation, we proceed with the case as laid down by the Bishop of Lincoln, and which every day comes before us in some shape or other.

By a reference to the passage as above, it will be found that he transfers the argument to the apostles, and considers its probable working on their minds. He asks at a tone even bordering on triumph, how they could possibly take his words literally, and not at once fly to the figurative meaning. But it must be remembered, he only asks. He does nothing more than ask. How could they? "Was it possible for them?" He does not think it even worth his while to prove anything on the subject. At all events, not a word have we, attempting to show that their natural reasoning must have infallibly led them to the figurative meaning.—Let us however proceed.

We freely grant that the immediate hearers who were personally addressed, are the real judges of the meaning of words. It is a sound maxim of biblical interpretation. Now, as regards the apostles, we must, as far as possible, place ourselves in their situation that night. The true meaning of the speaker must be that which he knew would be affixed to his words, by those who heard him. We must then know the means they had for explaining his words, and which he knew they would use; and therefore we must invest ourselves with their feelings and make the inquiry in their position. The whole question on the point is now reduced to this:

1°. Would the apostles at the moment their divine master pronounced the words, doubt of his omnipotence or his veracity; that is, would they adopt the impossibility or the absurdity spoken of as the only criterion by which they would interpret his meaning?—and

2°. How far could the Saviour have expected them to use this criticism—that is, to doubt of his omnipotence or veracity in catching the sense of his words. Hence we must see what was the intellectual span of the apostles' minds at this period.

It is well known that they were illiterate—ignorant—uneducated, some of them poor fishermen of Galilee; and hence to judge of the operations of their minds at the time, as you now would of Newton or Copernicus, would be worse than idle. Indeed, Christianity has been reproached with the fact of their original ignorance. They must be classed with that type of which we have examples enough in our own day—that ordinary class of virtuous, sensible, though ignorant men, utter strangers to the subtle distinctions of the present day that would flatter away every doctrine of the gospel. To talk to such a class on the subject of impossibility or contradictoriness to laws of nature, of extension or impenetrability of matter, and such like, would be little better than a wild waste of human breath! Their idea of possibility is measured solely by the degree of power used to overcome a difficulty, not by any degree of resistance; and when once that degree of power amounts with them to omnipotence—'tis useless to talk of resistance; there can be no resistance. You may speak of contradictions as long as you please, but the only contradiction they can conceive, is that any thing should be impossible to omnipotence!

But supposing that the tone of the Apostles' intellect was not so low as this: supposing that they could detect the repugnance of a certain conceivable proposition to an unchangeable law of nature, we have only to examine whether they would, on the instant, form a decision to that effect on the literal import of their master's words. Hence we must, if possible, discover what estimate they formed of his power, as exhibited in his works of which they were witnesses, and we shall then see whether they were fully prepared to hear and believe any declaration: especially on this occasion when seated with them the night before he suffered, he told them that he would not address them in parables—but that he would speak plainly.

The Apostles had seen their master perform the most stupendous miracles, on a variety of occasions, all tending to impress on their minds the conviction of his omnipotence. They had seen him open the eyes of the blind; unstop the ears of the deaf; unstring the tongues of the dumb; make cripples walk, and heal all manner of diseases,—restoring a withered limb to life and vigour, &c. Nor was this all—three times at least they saw him raise the dead to life; in one instance—that of Lazarus—when decomposition must have taken place, and of course where a change of matter from one state into another must have been effected.

Powerful as miracles like these were in preparing their minds for the unwavering conviction of his omnipotence, there were others more peculiarly fitted to establish his power over the received laws of nature; to shew them that with him nothing was impossible, and that therefore they should not rashly test his declarations by any apparent impossibility, or contradictoriness to those laws. For example; gravitation is one of the properties universally attributed to bodies, and did one of them plant a foot on the lake of Genesareth, he would surely sink. This was known to them. Yet they saw the body of their master for a time deprived of this property, and able to walk without sinking on the surface of the waters! They had also seen him change one substance into another at the marriage feast of Cana, and certainly these were not the men to make the distinction between the possibility of their master's power to change water into wine, and the impossibility of his changing wine into blood, the basis of any interpretation of his words.

Two other occasions must at once recur to the recollection of our readers, where in the presence of the Apostles he in a manner still more remarkable controlled the laws of nature: and that in such a manner as could not fail to convince them, that in the interpretation of any thing he might ever teach, they should never take as the criterion of his meaning, either impossibility, or the contradictoriness to the established laws of nature. We allude to the miracles of the loaves, where his omnipotence is so signally exhibited, that the last vestige of such an idea as limiting his power by the assumption of impossibility, must be at once removed from their minds, and those

minds rendered fully prepared to bow down without a doubt to his declarations. He feeds five thousand men with five loaves and two fishes; and four thousand with seven loaves. According to the history, it does not appear that the multiplication of the loaves took place by any addition to their number, either through the creation of new matter, or by being miraculously brought from some other place; but by actually causing the same substance, the very loaves, to be the nourishment of thousands. The miracle is never described as consisting in an increase of number, but in a sufficiency of what existed. And as to the fragments, they are not spoken of as additional pieces, but as part of that very bread, of those very loaves which had been broken, distributed and eaten by the people; and to show the folly of attempting to interpret his words or judge his actions either by the established experience of mankind, the laws of nature, or the maxims of science—the quantity thus left on each occasion was far greater than what originally was there, and from which that very remainder was taken! What here becomes of the laws of numbers? What here becomes of the laws of nature? Hence, the repetition of such acts as these must have gone far to weaken the confidence of simple minded men in any distinction that we can conceive them capable of drawing as to the precise fact in which they would admit, or reject his omnipotence, or his authority over the laws of nature. Facts like these of which they were witnesses must have, after three years' intercourse with their master, left them very little qualified, and still less disposed to make either impossibility or contradictoriness to the laws of nature, or our modern "absurdity," the basis of their reasoning when trying to understand the declarations of him who performed them. And with such notions of his omnipotence necessarily imbibed from what they saw him perform, is it reasonable to suppose that when they heard him say that what he then held in his hand was his body, they would for the first time test his expression by its repugnance to the established laws of nature after they had seen him so often controul those laws by other exhibitions of his power? Can we suppose that at the supper table they would thus have reasoned with themselves: "It is true we have seen him change water into wine: it is true we have seen him walk upon water, having deprived his body of its gravity: it is true that we have seen him feed thousands with a few loaves, and contrary to all experience, after that, the remainder greater than the original sum, all these things we have seen; but, the change here proposed—the multipresence of one substance here pointed out, meets the laws of nature at a point so nicely different from the former cases, that we must here for the first time doubt whether his power can go so far, and we must understand him figuratively?" But supposing they did settle down into this figurative interpretation; what confirmation could it have received after the resurrection, when they saw and knew that this very body,

on which they are supposed to spend all this acute reasoning and so suddenly too, was able to pass through closed doors, and even penetrate through the stone vault of the sepulchre, to the utter discomfiture of their previous reasoning on the laws of nature, or the boasted argument of to-day resting on what is called the impenetrability of matter?

The frame of mind thus formed by what they had seen, was not weakened by what they had heard in their master's school. So far from limiting their ideas of possibility, he labours to enlarge them, by impressing on them in the most solemn manner that nothing was impossible to him; he never reproves them so severely as when they doubted his power. "Why are ye fearful, O! ye of little faith? O! thou of little faith, why dost thou doubt?" After the parable of the camel passing through the eye of a needle, he adds, "With men this is impossible." How does he complete the antithesis? By saying, "With God it is possible?" No; he gives them a universal proposition in contradistinction to the first particular one; but, "with God, all things are possible." He encourages amongst all the firm belief in his absolute omnipotence. When the blind men petition him, he first puts the question to them "Do ye believe that I can do this unto you?" They express their conviction that he can. "According to your faith be it done unto you." Thus with the Centurian and Martha, and the leper. Nay, he tests the very fidelity, or the hollowness of his disciples, by their unqualified belief in his power; they were to hear a doctrine apparently involving an impossibility; those who would judge his words by the criterion of that impossibility, were to desert him; those judging by the established conviction of his omnipotence, were still, though in perplexity, to adhere to him. "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" They waver and abandon him; but the tried fidelity of the twelve is approved—"have I not chosen you twelve?"

As regards the Apostles then, we are, we trust, now entitled to ask; as they were illiterate and not scientific men, accustomed to see their divine master perform works, apparently at variance with the established order of nature, taught by him to repose the most unlimited confidence in his power; can they be supposed to take as the key of interpreting his words, the idea that here there was a greater violation of the laws of nature, than they ever witnessed before, and that in this case, and this only, his power failed him, the thing being infallibly impossible—absurd? But to close the matter, let us transfer the conclusion to the Saviour's mind, and see whether having unceasingly both by word and sign, encouraged the most unlimited, unqualified belief in his power, he would still expect, that here and here alone, they should judge of his expressions by the criterion of the thing being impossible to him, absurd in itself. Having always taught them to argue in this manner: "Although the thing may appear to us impossible, yet as our divine master says it; it must be so;" is it within the range of rational conjecture to suppose, that now, on a sudden he can expect them to reason thus—"since the thing appears to us impossible, even though