

LETTERS FROM THE HON. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS TO HIS SON ON THE BIBLE AND ITS TEACHINGS.

LETTER II.

The first point of view in which I have invited you to consider the Bible is in the light of *Divine Revelation*. And what are we to understand by these terms? I intend, as much as possible, to avoid the field of controversy, which I am not well acquainted with, and for which I have little respect, and still less inclination. My idea of the Bible as a *Divine Revelation* is founded upon its practical use to mankind, and not upon metaphysical subtleties. There are three points of doctrine, the belief of which forms the foundation of all morality. The first is, the existence of a God; the second is the immortality of the soul; and the third is, a future state of rewards and punishments.

Suppose it possible for a man to disbelieve either of these three articles of faith, and that man will have no conscience, he will have no other law than that of the tiger or the shark; the laws of man may bind him in chains, or may put him to death, but they never can make him wise, virtuous or happy. It is possible to believe them all without believing that the Bible is a *Divine Revelation*. It is so obvious to every reasonable being that he did not make himself, and the world which he inhabits could as little make itself, that the moment we begin to exercise the power of reflection, it seems impossible to escape the conviction that there is a Creator.

It is equally evident that the Creator must be a spiritual and not a material being; there is also a consciousness that the thinking part of our nature is not material, but spiritual—that it is not subject to the laws of matter, nor perishable with it. Hence arises the belief that we have an immortal soul; and pursuing the train of thought which the visible creation and observation upon ourselves suggests, we must soon discover that the Creator must also be the Governor of the universe; that His wisdom and His goodness must be without bounds; that He is a righteous God and loves righteousness; that mankind are bound by the laws of righteousness and are accountable to Him for their obedience to them in this life, according to their good or evil deeds.

This completion of divine justice must be reserved for another life. The existence of a Creator, the immortality of the human soul, and a future state of retribution, are therefore so perfectly congenial to natural reason when once discovered—or rather it is so impossible for human reason to disbelieve them—that it would seem the light of natural reason alone could suffice for their discovery; but the conclusion would not be correct. Human reason may be sufficient to get an obscure glimpse of these secret and important truths, but it cannot discover them in all their clearness. For example—in all their numberless false religions which have swayed the minds of men in different ages and regions of the world, the idea of a God has always been included:—

“Father of all! in every age,  
In every clime adored—  
By Saint, by Savage, and by Sage—  
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord.”

So says Pope's universal prayer. But it is the God of the Hebrews alone who is announced to us as the Creator of the world. The ideas of God entertained by all the most illustrious and most ingenious nations of antiquity were weak and absurd. The Persians worshipped the sun; the Egyptians believed in an innumerable multitude of gods, and worshipped not only oxen, crocodiles, dogs and cats, but even garlies and onions. The Greeks invented a poetical religion, and adored men and women, virtues and vices, air, water and fire, and everything that a vivid imagination could personify.

Almost all the Greek philosophers reasoned and meditated upon the nature of the gods; but scarcely any of them reflected enough even to imagine that there was but one God, and not one of them ever conceived of Him as the Creator of the world. Cicero has collected together all their opinions upon the nature of the gods, and pronounced them more like the dreams of madmen than the sober judgment of wise men. In the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there is an account of the change of Chaos in the world. Before the sea and the earth, and the sky that surrounds all things, (says Ovid), there was a thing called Chaos, and some of the gods (he does not know which) separated from each other the elements of this Chaos, and turned them into the world; thus far and no further could human reason extend. But the first words of the Bible are—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

The blessed and sublime idea of God, as the Creator of the universe, the source of all human happiness for which all the sages and philosophers of Greece and Rome groped in darkness and never found, is recalled in the

first verse of the Book of Genesis. I call it the source of all human virtue and happiness; because when we have attained the conception of a Being, who by the mere act of His will, created the world, it would follow as an irresistible consequence,—even if we were not told that the same Being must also be the Governor of His own creation—that man, with all other things, was also created by Him, and must hold his felicity and virtue on the condition of obedience to His will. In the first chapters of the Bible there is a short and rapid historical narrative of the manner in which the world and man were made—of the condition upon which happiness and immortality was bestowed upon our first parents—of their transgression of this condition—of the punishment denounced upon them—and the promise of redemption from it by the “seed of the woman.”

There are, and always have been, where the Holy Scriptures have been known, petty wittlings, and self-conceited reasoners, who cavil at some of the particular details of this narration. Even serious enquirers after truth have sometimes been perplexed to believe that there should have been evening and morning before the existence of the sun—that man should be made of clay, and woman from the ribs of man—that they should have been forbidden to eat an apple, and for disobedience to that injunction, be with all their posterity doomed to death, and that eating an apple could give “the knowledge of good and evil.”—that a serpent should speak and beguile a woman. All this is undoubtedly marvellous, and above our comprehension. Much of it is clearly figurative and allegorical; nor is it easy to distinguish what part of it is to be understood in a literal and not in a symbolical sense. But all that it imports us to know or understand is plain; the great and essential principles, upon which our duties and enjoyments depend, are involved in no obscurity. A God, the Creator and Governor of the universe, is revealed in all his majesty and power; the terms upon which he gave existence and happiness to the common parents of mankind are exposed to us in the clearest way.

Disobedience to the will of God, was the offence for which he was precipitated from paradise; obedience to God is the merit by which paradise is to be regained. Here, then, is the foundation of all morality,—the source of all our obligations, as accountable creatures. This idea of the transcendent power of the Supreme Being is essentially connected with that by which the whole duty of man is summed up; obedience to His will. I have observed that natural reason might suffice for an obscure perception, but not for the clear discovery of these truths. Even Cicero could start to his own mind the question: Whether justice could exist upon earth unless founded upon piety? but could not settle it to his own satisfaction. The ray of divine light contained in the principle, that justice has no other foundation than piety, could make its way to the soul of the heathen, but there it was extinguished in the low, unsettled and inconsistent notions which were the only foundations of his piety. How could his piety be pure or sound when he did not know whether there was one God or a thousand,—whether he or they had or had not any concern in the formation of the world, and whether they had any regard to the affairs or the conduct of mankind?

Once assume the idea of a single God the Creator of all things, whose will is the law of moral obligation to man, and to whom man is accountable, and piety becomes as rational as it is essential; it becomes the first of human duties; and not a doubt can thenceforth remain, that fidelity in the association of human piety and that most excellent virtue, Justice, repose upon no other foundation. At a later age than Cicero, Longinus expressly quotes the 3rd verse of the 1st chapter of Genesis as an example of the sublime. “God said let there be light, and there was light; and wherein consists its sublimity? In the image of the transcendent power presented to the mind, with the most striking simplicity of expression. Yet this verse only exhibits the effects of that transcendent power which the first verse discloses in announcing God as the Creator of the world. The true subject is in the idea given us of God. To such a God the heart of man must yield with cheerfulness the tribute of homage which it never could pay to the numerous gods of Egypt, to the dissolute debauchees of the heathen mythology, nor even to the more elevated, but not less fantastical imaginations of the Grecian philosophers and sages.

From your affectionate Father,  
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.

LETTER II.

The second general point of view, in which I propose for you to consider the Bible, to the end that it may “thoroughly furnish you unto all good works,” is in the historical character.

To a man of liberal education, the study of history is not only useful, and important, but

altogether indispensable, and with regard to the history contained in the Bible, the observation which Cicero makes respecting that of his own country is much more emphatically applicable, “that it is not so much praiseworthy to be acquainted with as it is shameful to be ignorant of it.” History, so far as it relates to the actions and adventures of men, may be divided in five different classes. First, the history of the world, otherwise called universal history; Second, that of particular nations; Third, that of particular institutions; Fourth, that of single families; and Fifth, that of individual men. The last two of these classes are generally distinguished by the name of memoirs and biography.

All these classes of history are to be found in the Bible, and it may be worth your while to discriminate them one from another. The universal history is short, and all contained in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, together with the first chapter of the first book of Chronicles, which is little more than a genealogical list of names; but it is of great importance, not only as it includes the history of the creation, of the fall of man, of the antediluvian world and the flood by which the whole human race, (excepting Noah and his family,) were destroyed, but as it gives a very precise account of the time from the creation until the birth of Abraham. This is the foundation of the ancient history, and in reading profane historians hereafter, I would advise you always to reflect upon their narratives with reference to it with respect to the chronology. A correct idea of this is so necessary to understand all history, ancient and modern, that I may hereafter write you something farther concerning it; for the present I shall only recommend to your particular attention the fifth and eleventh chapters of Genesis and request you to cast up and write me the amount of the age of the world when Abraham was born.

The remainder of the book of Genesis, beginning at the 12th chapter, is a history of one individual (Abraham) and his family, during three generations of his descendants, after which the book of Exodus commences with the history of the same family, multiplied into a nation: this national and family history is continued through the books of the Old Testament until that of Job, which is of a peculiar character, differing in many particulars from every other part of the Scriptures. There is no other history extant which can give so interesting and correct view of the rise and progress of human associations as this account of Abraham and his descendants, through all the vicissitudes to which individuals, families and nations are liable. There is no other history where the origin of a whole nation is traced up to a single man, and where a connected train of events and a regular series of persons from generation to generation is preserved. As the history of a family, it is intimately connected with our religious principles and opinions, for it is the family from which (in his human character) Jesus Christ descended. It begins by relating the commands of God to Abraham to abandon his country, his kindred, and his father's house, and go to a land which He would show him. This command was accompanied by two promises, from which, and from their fulfilment, arose the differences which I have just noticed between the history of the Jews and that of every other nation.

The first of these promises was “That God would make Abraham a great nation, and bless him;” the second, and incomparably the most important one was, that “in him all the families of the earth should be blessed.” This promise was made about two thousand years before the birth of Christ, and in Him had its fulfilment. When Abraham, in obedience to the command of God, had gone into the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared unto him and made him a third promise, that he should give that land to a nation which should descend from him, as a possession; this was fulfilled between five and six hundred years afterward. In reading all the historical books of both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the books of the Prophets, you should always bear in mind the reference which they have to these three promises of God to Abraham. All the history is no more than a narrative of the particular manner, and the detail of events by which those promises were fulfilled.

In the account of the creation, and the fall of man, I have already remarked that the moral doctrine inculcated by the Bible is, that the great consummation of all human virtue consists in obedience to the will of God. When we come hereafter to speak of the Bible in its ethical character, I shall endeavour to show you the intrinsic excellence of this principle; but I shall now only remark how strongly the principle itself is illustrated, first in the account of the fall, and next by the history of Abraham. In the account of the creation we are informed that God, after having made the world, created the first human pair, and “gave them do-

minion over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” He gave them also “every herb bearing seed, and the fruit of every tree for meat;” all this we are told “God saw was very good.”

Thus the immediate possession of everything was given them, and its perpetual enjoyment secured to their descendants, on condition of abstaining from the “fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” It is altogether immaterial to my present remarks whether the narrative is to be understood in a literal or allegorical sense, as not only the knowledge; but the possession of created good was granted; the fruit of the tree, could confer upon them no knowledge but that of evil, and the command was nothing more than to abstain from that knowledge—to forbear from rushing upon their own destruction.

It is not sufficient to say that this was a command in its own nature light and easy; it was a command to pursue the only law of their nature, to keep the happiness that had been heaped upon them without measure; but observe—it contained the principle of obedience—it was assigned to them as a duty—and the heaviest of penalties was denounced upon its transgression. They were not to discuss the wisdom or justice of this command; they were not to inquire why it had been enforced upon them, nor could they have the slightest possible motive for the inquiry; unqualified felicity and immortality were already theirs; wretchedness and death were alone forbidden them, but placed within their reach as merely trials of their obedience. They violated the law; they forfeited their joy and immortality; they “brought into the world, death and all our woe.”

Here, then, is an extreme case in which the mere principle of obedience could be tried—a command to abstain from that from which every motive of reason and interest would have deterred had the command never been given—a command given in the easiest of all possible forms, requiring not so much as an action of any kind, but merely forbearance; and its transgression was so severely punished, the only inference we can draw from it is that the most aggravated of all crimes, and that which includes in itself all others, is disobedience to the will of God. Let us now consider how the principle of obedience is inculcated in the history of Abraham, by a case in the opposite extreme. God commanded Abraham to abandon forever his country, his kindred and his father's house, to go, he knew not where; promising as a reward of his obedience, to bless him and his posterity, though he was then childless; he was required to renounce everything that could most contribute to the happiness and comfort of his life, and which was in his actual enjoyment; to become a houseless, friendless wanderer upon the earth, on the mere faith of the promise that a land should be shown him which his descendants should possess—that they should be a great nation—and that through them all mankind should receive in future ages a blessing.

The obedience required of Adam, was merely to retain all the blessings he enjoyed; the obedience of Abraham was to sacrifice all that he possessed for the vague and distant prospect of a future compensation to his posterity; the self-control and self-denial required of Adam, were in themselves the slightest that imagination can conceive,—but its failure was punished by the forfeiture of all his enjoyments; the self-dominion to be exercised by Abraham was of the most severe and painful kind—but its accomplishment will ultimately be rewarded by the restoration of all that was forfeited by Adam.

This restoration, however, was to be obtained by no ordinary proof of obedience; the sacrifice of mere personal blessings, however great, could not lay the foundation for the redemption of mankind from death; the voluntary submission of Jesus Christ to his own death, in the most excruciating and ignominious form, was to consummate the great plan of redemption, but the submission of Abraham to sacrifice his beloved and only son Isaac—the child promised by God himself, and through whom all the greater promises were to be carried into effect, the feelings of nature, the parent's bowels, were all required to be sacrificed by Abraham to the blind, unquestioning principle of obedience to the will of God. The blood of Isaac was not indeed shed—the butchery of an only son by the hand of his father, was a sacrifice which a merciful God did not require to be completely executed; but as an instance of obedience it was imposed upon Abraham, and nothing less than the voice of an angel from Heaven could arrest his uplifted arm, and withhold him from sheathing his knife in the heart of his child. It was upon this testimonial of obedience that God's promise of redemption was expressly renewed to Abraham. “In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice.” Gen. xxii. 18.

From your affectionate Father,  
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.