

Search The Scripture

Robert Hawker (1753-1827)

"Search the scripture, - they are they which testify of me."
John v, 39.

The noble faculty of reason, which is the distinguishing excellence of man, among other eminent uses is evidently given him to direct his judgment, and to guard his mind from error and delusion. From the present imperfect state of things, however, reason, unassisted by some superior principle, finds perpetual difficulties, which perplex and confound the understanding. Human nature is always open to imposition. We frequently behold objects through false mediums. We argue from mistaken principles. We adopt opinions which we afterwards find to be erroneous; and yet too often, from the influence of those prepossessions, we draw our conclusions. Hence, therefore, we cannot be too much upon our how we hastily determine on any matter. After all our most vigilant observations, how little knowledge are we able to obtain even of the most common events of life, which pass in daily review before us! But when the great and awful points of religion are the subject of inquiry; when that sacred mystery hid from ages, the wonder of the universe, and which even angels do not comprehend, but "desire to look into," (I Peter i. 12,) when this is brought before the mind for discussion, with what caution ought we to decide on a matter so abstruse and difficult! Here surely, if any where, reason finds her weakness and insufficiency, and therefore should gladly implore that

divine illumination from above, which is promised in Scripture "to the meek and humble."

In the preceding discourse some observations were made with a view to ascertain the dignity of our Lord. His pre-existence to his advent in the flesh was proved from the authority of Scripture; and this fact was supported by another striking circumstance founded on the same testimony, namely, his being the Creator and Preserver of the universe. Under such great and eternal characters does the Author of the Christian faith appear in those sacred records.

But, on the supposition of the truth of these premises, an observation meets us which demands attention. It is this. If Christ really possessed this existence and glory with his Father before the world, and is the maker and upholder of all things, is it not more than probable that some appearance of him should have been discovered through the many intermediate ages, from the fall of man to his advent in the flesh? For though the incarnation of the Son of God, for reasons unknown to us, was postponed to what is called "the fulness of time," in which all the predictions concerning this illustrious character of the Messiah centered; yet surely it is but reasonable to expect some vestige, at least, of this divine person in the earlier ages or the world, especially as God was pleased occasionally to vouchsafe to his fallen and degraded creatures some manifestations of his will.

This observation is certainly a very proper one, and claims some regard. And though I cannot conceive a proof of this kind to be necessary, on the supposition that the fact itself of Christ's pre-existence is clearly assured, yet if any traces can be found in the Old Testament, corresponding to the account we find of him in the New, they will, no doubt, mutually illustrate and confirm each other; and altogether serve to place the blessed Redeemer's character in such an exalted

point of view, as may help to strengthen our faith in this great article of religion.

And here a subject opens to our investigation, which may engage the closest study, and will reward the greatest exertions of the most enlightened mind. In searching the sacred volume for the footsteps of him "whose goings forth have been from everlasting," (Micah v. 2.) perhaps it will be found that all the dispensations of God, relating to mankind, from the very first dawn of revelation, have been uniformly and invariably carried on in the person of his divine Son: that he is JEHOVAH, to whom is ascribed the creation of the world; who resided occasionally among men before the fall; whose voice Adam heard in the garden of Eden; who personally appeared to Abraham, and to many others, in the patriarchal ages; spake unto Moses from the flaming bush; went before the children of Israel through the wilderness; descended on Mount Sinai enshrined in glory, and gave the law; and was visible, in a great variety of instances, to that people, as best suited the various purposes of his will. In short, from the creation of the world, to the final consummation of all things, it is he, and he only, who is the visible JEHOVAH, and hath carried on, and will complete, the executive part of the divine government, appearing under the several characters mentioned of him in Scripture, according as the circumstances of mankind required, in the several ages of the world. Hence he is our Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and finally will be our Judge, when he cometh, agreeable to his promise, at the last day, to close the whole of his government in righteousness; "to be glorified in his saints, and admired in all that believe," (2 Thes. i. 10.)

Now, whether this opinion can derive any countenance and authority from Scripture, is the important question; but it must be confessed there is nothing in it which is foreign to our most natural ideas of the Supreme Being, or repugnant either to

reason or revelation. On the contrary, there seems to be an admirable consistency and agreement with both. For that the same divine person who made the world, and by whose energy and power it is continually preserved and supported, should interpose to rectify and amend the evils crept into it by human infirmity, and at length should come to judge the moral subjects of his government, who by their different abilities are placed in a situation of becoming accountable creatures; this is certainly just what might be expected, and corresponding to all our notions of right reason. And, on the supposition that this is the true state of the case, I will venture to say, the mind of man cannot conceive any thing more magnificent and awful, than that of a divine and almighty Being descending from a state of glory, and taking upon him a form of flesh, in order to repair the desolations of many generations," and to restore perfect order among all the works God. The whole process of the divine dispensations, according to this scheme, is begun, carried on, and will be completed, by him who "is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever," (Heb. xiii. 8.)

It cannot be supposed, in the very nature of things, that human faculties are competent to trace so mysterious a subject very far. "The way of God, (says the Psalmist) is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known." (Psalm lxxvii. 19.) Yet as the divine goodness, in order as it were to excite the attention of man, hath graciously condescended to throw some rays of light around the darkness of the scene, and hath moreover promised the assistance of his Holy Spirit to all that, in humility of mind, seek instruction from above; there appears an evident duty, as well as a reward of the noblest kind, attending the investigation of this most interesting of all subjects. And what can engage the attention of the human mind with so much satisfaction, as the humble endeavour to explore the footsteps of that great Benefactor of mankind, to whom we owe such inexpressible obligations? In doing this, we are also

obeying the precept which our blessed Lord gave to the Jews, upon a similar occasion, when he referred them to the sacred writings for the evidences of his commission and authority: "Search the Scriptures (says Christ,) for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me." In obedience to this command let us direct our attention to this pursuit, and, after having first implored the Holy Spirit to be our guide, let us examine what information we can gather from thence respecting our divine LORD. Perhaps, now "the vail of the Old Testament is done away in Christ, we may" through the divine blessing, "with open face, behold as in a glass the glory of our Lord," (2 Cor. iii. 15,18).

The leading object of the present discourse will be to search the Scriptures for any traces of Christ, in the early ages of the world, sufficient to establish our belief of his personal appearance among men.

The invisibility of the Divine Being to mortal eye is well known to be the doctrine of both Testaments of Scripture. "Thou canst not see my face and live," saith Jehovah to Moses. (Ex. xxxiii. 20.). And the apostles of Christ assert the same thing. "No man (saith St. John) hath seen God at any time," (John i. 18.) And St. Paul assures us, "that God dwelleth in that light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see," (I Tim. vi. 16.). He is "the King eternal, immortal, invisible," (I Tim. i. 17.) And our blessed Lord himself, to sum up the evidence, hath declared, that "no man hath seen the Father, save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father," (John vi. 46.) "Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape," (John v. 37.) From all which it is evident that the sight of God is inadmissible to man in his present state.

This being a fact perfectly incontrovertible, the question is, what are we to understand from those numerous passages of Scripture where the presence of the Lord is most positively

assured, unless we apply it to the person of God's only begotten Son, who is declared to be "the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person?" Without referring to all the instances of this kind which might be brought forward in proof, I believe every one Who is at all conversant with the sacred writings, will immediately recollect, that there are many very striking passages where the personal appearance of Jehovah is declared to have happened, and upon various occasions. I am not speaking of such as are visional, or figurative expressions: but real and certain. I am sensible of the allowances to be made for the metaphorical language of Scripture, so suited to the genius of the Eastern nations. Thus, the right arm of the Lord, and the voice of the Lord; these, no doubt are figurative expressions: and earthquakes, storms, and tempests, by way of figure, are sometimes called angels, and messengers of Jehovah. But this is not the case in the circumstance which I allude. When, for example, we read in the book of Exodus, "that Jehovah talked with Moses face to face, as a man talketh with his friend," (Exod. xxxiii. 11.) So again, when in a conference like this with the great father of the faithful, Jehovah assumes to himself a supreme power, and speaks of his future dispensations respecting mankind, not as the agent of another, but as acting in his own name, and by his own authority, (Gen. xvii.) And when it is said also, in another place, "that Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of the people saw the God of Israel," (Exod. xxiv. 9, 10.) These instances surely can never be called visional, symbolical, or figurative. It is plain sense and plain meaning, and if there be any one matter of fact on which we may safely depend, it must be here; for if these repeated assurances of the personal appearance of Jehovah can, by any plausible argument, be reduced to a mere figure or vision, there is nothing to be met with in the whole volume of Scripture but, by a like accommodation, may be as easily construed away from its first and most obvious acceptance.

That all these appearances were in the person of the Son of God, I by no means assert: upon so mysterious a subject I would be understood as speaking with the utmost caution and diffidence. Could the point once be proved that it was our blessed Lord, there would be an end to all controversy respecting his divinity; such manifestations of GODHEAD, accompanied with such declarations of character, must for ever silence all doubts on this head. But if they be real appearances, and not figurative, and if (as an apostle tells us) that though "no man hath seen God at any time, yet the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him," (John i. 11,) it seems very likely to suppose that all the accounts we meet with in Scripture of the manifestation of a personal Jehovah, might, with great safety, be explained by this infallible rule.

But, that we may not too hastily determine on this important matter, let us search the word of God further, and see whether we can gain any additional information that may illustrate this point more fully.

One leading principle, to help us in this inquiry, the Jewish Scriptures happily supply. In the relation they give of this appearance of Jehovah, we find, throughout the whole history, but one and the same being uniformly described. However distinguished by different appellations or titles, as might best correspond to the immediate purpose of his appealing, whether he be called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, or the Angel of the Covenant, still one and the same person is invariably intended. The Jehovah which expelled Adam from the garden of Eden, was the same Jehovah who made a covenant with Abraham, and who declared that he would not leave him until he had done all that he had spoken to him of, and that in his seed should all families of the earth be blessed," (Gen. xxviii. 15.) Accordingly we find he renewed this covenant with the patriarchs, and

again revealed himself to Moses, from the flaming bush, under the same almighty distinctions. And when, from the Egyptian bondage, after a series of the most stupendous events, he had led the children of Israel through the wilderness, until he had brought them into the promised Canaan; upon every occasion in which he was graciously pleased to manifest his presence, the same great character was invariably proclaimed by which he was distinguished as their God, and they his people, and the sheep of his pastures. At length, when the Israelites were settled in their own borders, and a temple was built to the more immediate honour of their Lord, though the personal appearance of Jehovah was now withdrawn, the Shekinah, or manifestation of his glory, still appeared, shadowing the mercy-seat, but without form or similitude; yet before his departure, and when the temple was destroyed, the same Jehovah assured them, by his prophets, that "he would return again in the latter days, and dwell in the midst of them," (Zech. ii. 10;) that "the glory of the latter house should be greater than the former," (Hag. ii. 9;) and that he would make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that he had made with their fathers, in the day when he had brought them from the land of Egypt," (Jer. xxxi. 31.) All which evidently and clearly proves, that one and the same Almighty Being constantly presided over the affairs of his church.

This identity of person and character will be of great help to us in our inquiry to whom it belongs. And if we can find a single instance of sufficient authority from the New Testament, to suppose it applicable to our blessed Lord, it will throw a considerable degree of light upon the whole history, and become not a little conclusive to the point in question.

Among many circumstances of this kind, which might be brought forward as presumptive evidences to induce the belief, that the personal Jehovah of the Old Testament is the

same being with the Lord of the New, the following are remarkably striking:

When Jehovah appeared to Moses in the flame of fire in the bush, he was pleased to reveal himself under that great and eternal distinction, "I am that I am," (Exod. iii. 14;) which is the very appellation Christ assumed, when, discoursing with the Jews on the subject of his mission, he claimed a priority of existence to Abraham, and said, "Before Abraham was, I am," (John viii. 58 ;) an argument strongly presumptive, at least, that when our blessed Lord distinguished himself by this awful incommunicable name of the great Jehovah, he referred to this awful scene, and thereby intimated his real character. And that the Jews considered our Lord's meaning in this sense is more than probable, for they immediately took up stones to cast at him, for the supposed blasphemy; but he, by virtue of this very divinity, in a miraculous manner, so concealed himself from their knowledge, that "going through the midst of them," they knew him not, "and he passed by," (John viii. 59.)

Another instance, very highly presumptive to justify our belief that our blessed Lord was the very Jehovah mentioned in the Old Testament, we meet with in the writings of the apostle Paul, in which he is illustrating a passage of the Jewish history. The passage is this. The children of Israel, in their journey through the wilderness, pitched in Rephidim, where they murmured for want of water; upon which occasion Moses cried unto the Lord, and the Lord commanded Moses, saying, "Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and the rod wherewith thou smotest the river take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there, upon the rock in Horeb, and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel." Now, that no one should be at a loss for the explanation of this passage, we have the authority of an apostle to apply this personal

appearance of Jehovah to our blessed Lord. "For they drank," says he, "or that spiritual rock that followed them, and that spiritual rock was Christ."

Similar to this, upon another occasion, in the history of that people, when Jehovah sent fiery serpents to destroy some for their disobedience and murmuring, the apostle, in his reflections and observations upon their unworthy behaviour, uses this remarkable argument to his Corinthian converts, to deter them from the imitation of so bad an example. "Neither," says he, "let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents." A plain proof that it was the opinion of St. Paul that the Jehovah who conducted the Israelites through the wilderness, and manifested himself to them upon various occasions, was no other than Christ.

Lastly; the Evangelist St. John makes an application of a passage in one of the prophets, which seems to remove all doubt that the glory of Jehovah, which the prophet beheld in a vision, was the glory of Christ himself. Our blessed Lord having wrought no conviction upon the hearts of his hearers, at a time when preaching his gospel to them, though his doctrine was attested with the operation of miracles, this brought to mind to the apostle the prediction of Isaiah the prophet: "He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart, that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart and be converted, and I should heal them. These things said Esaias, "when he saw his glory, and spake of him." This quotation from the prophet, which the Evangelist without hesitation applies to Christ, carries with it an evidence not easily refuted. And if the authority of such an expositor is at all valid to our argument, it must, I think, have great weight with every candid mind.

But these evidences will be strengthened in their importance, when we proceed to consider also certain peculiarities

ascribed to the person of Christ by the sacred writers, and assumed by Jesus himself; which could not with the smallest shadow of reason, be applied to him, but under the idea that he was the Jehovah and God of Israel, which appeared to our fathers in the wilderness. St. John, in the first chapter of his gospel, speaking of the eternal Word, "which was in the beginning with God, and was God; who made the world, was in the world, and the world knew him not," Adds also, that "he came unto his own, and his own received him not," (John i.) This is a strong implication of Christ's being relatively known before. For, whether we consider the expression his own as referring to the Jews, who were called God's peculiar people, or whether by right, as the Creator of the world; in either case his pre-existence, and personal connection with mankind, by virtue of some priority of right and inheritance, must be pre-supposed and admitted. It could not be in his character, as the Redeemer of the world, for in this case the right would have preceded the purchase; and moreover, this would have made the expression inapplicable to the Jews only. It evidently proves, therefore, some antecedent connection, by virtue of which Christ was their Lord, and they his people. And where are we to look for this but in that history where it is said, "Jehovah chose them to be a special people to himself, above all the people who were upon the face of the earth?" (Deut. vii. 6.)

Again; Christ's lamentation over Jerusalem, and the particular and affecting expressions he made use of upon that occasion, is another very great probability (to speak the least of it) of our Lord's personal appearance and connection with the children of Israel, before his incarnation. St. Luke informs us, that "when he came near to Jerusalem, he beheld the city and wept over it," (Luke xix. 41.;) and St. Matthew, in his account of this transaction, adds, that he brake forth into that tender apostrophe, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that were sent unto thee, how

often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew xxiii. 37.) Now it becomes a very proper question, under what part of the sacred history of the life of Jesus Christ do we find this anxiety for Israel, before the season of his humiliation in the flesh? In what page of the Testament are we to look for those repeated instances of his love and solicitude for them? There is no one passage that can, with the smallest propriety, be considered as relating to Christ's passionate lamentation over this unhappy people. It is plain, therefore, that he must have alluded to some former period, when he says, he would often have gathered the children of Israel together, with an anxiety equal to that of the hen, when she seeks to cover her brood from danger, with the spreading of her wings. And corresponding to this idea, we find, in the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy, that Jehovah is represented as exceedingly anxious for the preservation of his people; that "he found them in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; that he led him about and instructed him, and kept him as the apple of his eye. Jehovah alone did lead him, there was no strange God in him." Now if Jehovah alone did lead him, and Christ, in his anxiety, evidently referred to some former instances of his affection; is it not a most probable conclusion, that this history is altogether applicable to our blessed Lord?

These circumstances are to me, I confess, very strong presumptive evidences at least, that, Christ was the visible Jehovah, who occasionally appeared both before, and under the Jewish dispensation. The application made by the sacred writers in the history of Christ to that period; the peculiarities distinguishable in our Lord's person; and the expressions he himself made use of, will hardly admit of any other construction.

But there is another argument, yet remaining to be considered, which gives strength and confirmation to the whole, and is certainly superior to every other; on the truth of which, if I mistake not, depends, in a great measure, the connection of both Testaments of Scripture, and which, indeed if it be not allowed, destroys all consistency between them; and that is, Christ cannot be the Messiah, nor the real lawgiver of Christians, unless he answers to the character predicted of him in the Scriptures of the Jews.

This view of the subject is striking, and deserves a more particular discussion.

I have already observed, in the course of this sermon, that the history of the Jewish church, by preserving an identity of person in the great and almighty Protector of their nation, has happily supplied us with one leading principle to guide us through the mysterious part of our subject. And here it becomes most eminently serviceable. For it is evident, from all the history of that people, that the Jehovah who appeared to Abraham, and made an everlasting covenant with him, and confirmed this covenant to his descendants in the solemn promulgation of the law on Mount Sinai, and continued the manifestation of his presence among that people occasionally, as circumstances required, until the building of the temple; expressly promised, before he withdrew the glory of his appearance, that he would come again in the latter days, and dwell among them. "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord," (Zech. ii. 10.) "And in that day it shall be said, Lo, this is our God, we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord, we have waited for him, we will be glad, and rejoice in his salvation," (Isaiah xxv. 9.) All which plainly refers to one and the same person and character; for in that day it is said, "The Lord shall be king over all the earth; and there shall be one Lord, and his name one." (Zech. xiv. 9.) And as a further

confirmation of this, the prophet Jeremiah expressly declares, that the Jehovah who made the old covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah is the same Jehovah who would return again in the latter days, and make a new one. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband to them, saith the Lord; but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people," (Jer. xxxi. 31, 32.)

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Now from the testimony of these Scriptures we have authority to draw the following conclusions: first, That the same Almighty Jehovah which led, and governed, and protected the children of Israel, during the whole of their eventful history, was expected to come again and dwell among them in the latter days: and, secondly, that this Jehovah at his return, was to make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, and different from the covenant which he had before made with their fathers, in the day he took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. Hence, therefore, it seems to follow, that if Christ be not the Jehovah which manifested himself to the Israelites in the wilderness,

according to those scriptures he is not the Jehovah they were taught to expect, and consequently, not the Messiah. Neither could he be the Jehovah which was to make a new covenant with the house of Israel, unless he be the same Jehovah which made the old.

And this identity of person and character, is not only essential to be preserved for the completion of these promises of Scripture, but must be carefully distinguished on another equally important consideration. The Jews were plainly taught to expect a change in their system of legislation, but they were as plainly taught it should be accomplished by one and the same being. The Jehovah which was to make the new covenant, was the founder of the old,

And this identity of person and character, is not only essential to be preserved for the completion of these promises of Scripture, but must be carefully distinguished on another equally important consideration. The Jews were plainly taught to expect a change in their system of legislation, but they were as plainly taught it should be accomplished by one and the same being. The Jehovah which was to make the new covenant, was the founder of the old; and nothing less than this could certainly be sufficient for its alteration: for as the law given on Mount Sinai was of divine authority, and accompanied with all the manifestations of the divine presence, it is evident none but the original lawgiver himself could possibly supersede, or do away its obligation. Nor was this change in the law of Moses the smallest impeachment of the immutability of the divine nature. For the alteration was not in God, but man. The moral law still continues the same, and will remain for ever for it is of eternal duration: and as Christ observed "Sooner might heaven and earth pass than one jot or tittle of this law to fail. He came," therefore, "not to destroy this law, but to fulfil it." But the ceremonial law could be no longer necessary, when the purpose for which it ministered

was answered and completed; when the substance was once come, the shadow was, of course, done away. Besides, many reasons concurred also to render the removal of the Mosaic ordinances expedient. When the Israelites became scattered into divers countries, there could no longer remain the possibility of performing the sacrifices at the Temple, nor of appearing three times in a year at their solemn feasts at Jerusalem. And when the kingdom of the Messiah was come, which by a progressive influence was to extend over the whole earth, the name of Jehovah, no longer limited to an handful of people, was to be great among the Gentiles) and in every place incense was to be offered unto his name, and a pure offering."

From these united considerations it appears to be a fair and probable conclusion, that the great lawgiver of Christians is the original lawgiver of the Jews; for this preserves an harmony (which otherwise is broken) between both Testaments of Scripture, and proves them to be consistent with the, divine immutability on which the whole is founded.

If there these circumstances, collectively taken from a body of evidence sufficient to rest our belief on, that the great Author of the Christian faith, whose dignity and character we have in part already reviewed, who was in possession, as he himself assures us, of "glory with the Father before the world was," and whom the sacred writers declare to have been in conjunction with his Father, the Maker and Preserver of all things; if the circumstances, I say, collectively taken, authorize our belief that Jesus is the Jehovah who personally appeared under the Jewish dispensation, and in the earlier ages of the world, I think it will follow, that every objection to his divinity must yield to the clear and express revelation of his having appeared among men previous to his incarnation; and we have reason to believe, that all the ordinations of God

respecting mankind, have been uniformly and invariably conducted in the person of his blessed Son.

Though what hath been now offered cannot, from the very nature of things, be considered more than the fruit outlines of a subject, which taken in all its parts, surpasses human ability to explore; yet I should hope it is sufficient to give some little insight (as far as we have Scripture authority to carry us) into this part of the mysterious government of God. And from this view we not only perceive a wonderful consistency throughout the whole design of revelation, but also the conclusion naturally resulting from it; namely, that one and the same Almighty Architect both planned and executed the physical and moral structure of our nature.

And now I should hope, the evidence for the GODHEAD of Jesus, like a mighty river, increasing as it descends from the numerous streams pouring into it on every side, swells upon your mind and carries all opposition before it. And when we come to view the testimonies which appear in the history of our blessed Lord during his incarnation, all leading to the same conclusion, our hearts, overpowered with the torrent of conviction, will cry out with Nathaniel, "This is the Son of God, this is the King of Israel."