

Literature.

EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL BETWEEN DEATH AND THE RESURRECTION.

BY THE REV. GEORGE CROLY.*

The two most ancient and most universal doctrines in the world, are the existence of a Supreme Being, and the existence of the soul after death. Both have formed the belief of races of mankind, separate by the widest intervals of time and space; they were the doctrines to the earliest dwellers upon earth, as much as they are of its present generation; they are the substance of a belief, however rude, in the forests and wildernesses of the New World, as much as they are in the cultivated wisdom and civilized life of the Old. If consent, antiquity, suitableness of our nature, and the conviction of innumerable minds of the highest rank, can give them the force of principles, they are fixed and unalterable portions of human knowledge; of the most essential and loftiest nature.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was certainly not made an article of the Mosaic Law, and apparently for the reason which predominated through the whole of that dispensation. It was preliminary to a clearer and more illustrious one. Imperfection was a part of its nature. But no charge can lie against the mercy and wisdom of the Law-giver. He gave a most powerful inducement for virtue, in giving temporal blessings as its reward: perhaps he gave the only inducement which could powerfully act upon an obstinate and half-barbarian people; perhaps, too, the only satisfactory proof of the soul's immortality that could be given, was the resurrection of the Messiah—an event necessarily future. It is unquestionable, besides, that one of the objects of the Jewish dispensation was to give testimony to the being and providence of Deity, in the presence of the surrounding nations; and, to a certain extent, to convert them to the knowledge of God—an object much more likely to be attained by the visible miracles of providential prosperity and deliverance displayed among the Jewish people, than by the mere abstract view of reward in heaven, however superior.

As to the presumed injustice of denying to the Jew the knowledge which has been given to the Christian, there is no ground for the presumption, unless it be affirmed that all knowledge must be given, or the criminal be deemed innocent. To the Jew, the ordinance declaring temporal prosperity to be the reward of goodness, was given. The only question is, whether it was sufficient to excite the human heart to obedience?—there is no doubt that it was. To the Christian, to whom as a member, not of a small community, but of the general world, the promise of temporal prosperity could not be strictly applicable, the rewards of immortality were declared as an inducement to excite him to virtue; undoubtedly an inducement of a higher class, yet still, in all probability, not the highest, by a thousand degrees, that the Deity might offer, or that may be at this hour acting on the minds of beings in other parts of the creation. But if the inducement be such as ought to excite the mind of man to act, we have no right to murmur against the presumed partiality, that having given us knowledge enough for our state, has not given us all knowledge.

Yet it is equally unquestionable, that though the actual Mosaic Code contained no promise of reward beyond the grave, the Hebrew Scriptures are full of direct expressions of the soul's immortality. If there were but the one—"I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," the declaration that silenced the Sadducees, must have been long anticipated by the wise among the people—"God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." He is not the Lord of beings extinct and annihilated, of nonentities, but of actual existences—men removed from the humility of their life of sojourning in the wilderness of the world, to their life of glory in the Paradise of God.

The general belief of Hethenism was confessedly in the future existence: a belief from time to time contested by the querulous and feeble philosophy of their sophists and debaters, but unshaken among the infinite multitude.

The fictions of the poets are in all nations constructed upon the popular belief. The Greek and Roman tales of Tartarus and Elysium, however enriched by the fine fancies of men of genius, were but the transcripts of the universal tradition, that the soul survived the separation from the body, and immediately upon that separation, entered upon

an active state of existence. The general name for its place of separate existence was Hades, or Orcus.

"Multos Danaum dimittimus Orco."—Æn. 2.

For this place the Jews used the word Sheol, derived from the Hebrew primitive, implying, by that curious variety of significations common to the language—to ask, as a matter of anxious inquiry; to crave eagerly,—and to demand as a loan, or solicit as a matter to be returned. The word for the Grave, or receptacle of the body alone, is Keber. In the sublime passage of Isaiah, xiv. 9., where the King of Babylon is triumphed over, he descends to Sheol, and is met by the Rephaim, the spirits of the tyrants who have sunk into the grave before him, and who give him the terrible welcome—"Art thou become even as one of us?"

But the true evidence, equally superior to the feebleness of tradition, and the perplexity of human conjecture, is in the New Testament.

The doctrine is of the highest interest to the human mind. The aspect even of the grave is repulsive to our nature. The abandonment—the separation from life—the decay—all are features that startle the heart of man. But the true terror is the fearful darkness beyond; that wild waste through which the mind attempts to travel in vain, and which the imagination either relinquishes in despair, or peoples with the forms of a bewildered and harrassed dream.

It is the glory of Christianity that it relieves the mind from the dread of final ruin. But in that long duration which has intervened between the death of our forefathers in the faith and the final resurrection to their reward, and which may still intervene between our own departure and the great day of restoration—what is to be the state of the disembodied mind? Is it to sink into utter unconsciousness with the body?—Against its total extinction we are secure. But are the six thousand years that have passed over the tombs of the Patriarchs to have been years of utter insensibility? Are the illustrious displays of a perpetual Providence—the miracles that divine power has been pouring out like sunbeams, from the eternal source of power and glory; the sublime counteraction of the vices and rebellions of our fallen nature in the vast extent of the Heathen world; the conduct of heaven in raising up the chosen people; the whole magnificent system of the divine government on earth, more magnificent than even all the glories of the material universe;—are all those lofty views which kindle the adoration of the highest spirits of heaven to be looked upon as having been utterly hidden from those who are declared, during their mortal career, to have walked with God? This we cannot believe without the evidence of either some physical impossibility, or some distinct declaration of Scripture.

Can we conceive that the glowing spirit of St. Paul has slumbered during almost two thousand years?—that the dispensations of the Almighty wisdom during a third part of the age of the world have been hidden from a being, whose hourly delight was in the view of those dispensations; who drank in knowledge, faith, and hope, direct from the eternal fount; whose heart was hourly mounting on the wings of holiness and burning gratitude to the throne of the Eternal; whose spirit was actually borne up, before it had thrown off the evil of flesh, to the third heaven? What but the positive law of Scripture can authorize the belief, that, while even the passing generations,—beings immersed in the world, darkened by its ignorance, and inflamed by its passions,—may trace those mighty instances of benevolent power, exult in the knowledge that they pour upon them, and feel their highest hope and richest mental enjoyment in the view of the rapid completion of the promise and prophecy of the Eternal; yet that the spirit of the great Apostle,—with his fight finished, his work of faith and holy heroism done, his immortal crown gained, his solemn struggle with earthly passion and fleshly error ended in victory,—should, at the moment of triumph, be cast into the chains of darkness; have all his noble faculties and angelic thoughts, his ambition of eternity, sunk into a sea of oblivion; his freed spirit, that had actually seen, even in life, what it had not entered into the heart of man to conceive, nor had ever before been given to the eye of man to witness,—the Paradise of God,—should be sunk for years immeasurable into a clod of the valley.

All analogy is against such a conception. But we have the direct evidence of Scripture for the active existence of the soul on the separation from the body—the often-quoted answer of our Lord to those Jewish doctors, who denied the existence of the soul, "God is not the God of the dead but the living." This undoubtedly implies, that he is the Lord of the living in some more definite sense than as he is the supreme master of all creation, active and inactive—merely material, and instinct with life. He is here declared to be the Lord of beings existing at the time when the

words were spoken, though the Patriarchs were laid in their graves nearly four hundred years before.

Another text (Matthew, x. 28,) which we do not recollect to have seen applied, strongly expresses the foundation of the doctrine. "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul," is an obvious declaration, that whatever may be the means of extinguishing life, the Spirit of man is beyond their reach—that it does not share the grave. Our Lord's language to the penitent thief, is a similar declaration: "I say unto thee, this day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." Attempts have been made to represent, by a mistranslation, this text as only a general and remote promise: as if our Lord had said, "This day I tell thee." But the immediate time seems to be distinctly implied. The penitent thief had made a request applicable to a period, which, when he saw the Messiah on the cross, and palpably leaving life, he must have looked on as remote, "Lord, remember me when thou comest to thy kingdom." His belief in the truth of Messiah, must certainly have been of the most pre eminent kind, when, in the midst of the fullest visible proof that the King of Israel was a human being, overwhelmed by his enemies, expiring in the common agonies of the cross, and suffering without resistance the rejection, tauntings, and cruelty of his people; with even his immediate followers as such all flying; and but a few, prompted by personal affection, venturing to approach his dying hour: and not less in the midst of the horrid pangs that were rending every nerve of the criminal himself, he could proclaim, by his solitary and glorious avowal, his reliance on the declaration of God. The answer, then, is worthy of the Lord of life and death. "I tell thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise." I shall not put off the reward to the period when I shall come in my triumph, the visible King of Israel and the world: I shall lead you at once into the place of beatitude, where the disembodied souls of the holy are. The text also makes a striking distinction between the request and the promise. The criminal asks to be a sharer in the future kingdom. This is not answered. But he is promised an entrance into the present Paradise; a promise, in which the remote glory is included, with the addition of the immediate and unsolicited happiness. The parable of Dives and Lazarus, confessedly, like all the other parables, founded on the general belief of the people to whom it was addressed, is a proof of the general belief at the time; but it is more. There is a moral impossibility in our Lord's having taken it for the foundation of even a parable, if its material were not essentially true. The adjuncts of the narrative may be, or may be not, additions, for the purpose of giving an influence to the lesson at the time. But, as Paley well observes, all the parables, seem to have been systematically founded on fact. And where, we may add, do we find any instance of a parable touching on the gross fables of antiquity, either Greek or Asiatic, of which, we know, that the greater part were familiar in Syria?

Our Lord is also declared to have descended, after his death, into Hades, the place of the disembodied spirit, (improperly translated Hell,) and, as if expressly to obviate any vagueness in our belief of the fact, his actual occupation there is assigned:—he is declared to have preached to the spirits there, whose bodies had perished in the deluge; probably that portion of antediluvian mankind, which had not revolted with the multitude, but which, as is the law of great catastrophes, had suffered in the general punishment of the evil.

But our Lord is declared to have been in all things "our ensample." Like us he lived on earth, subject to its struggles and privations; like us he died; like him we are to rise from the grave bodily;—and why are we to suppose that in one point alone,—he active existence of the soul between death and the resurrection,—we are to be dissimilar?

At his death, he makes an obvious distinction between the body, which he was to leave on the cross, or surrender to the grave, and the Spirit, which was to survive. In the final agony he cries, "Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit." And thereupon, says the Evangelists, "he gave up the Spirit." He does not present his body to the hands of the Father. St. Stephen, when dying, with the vision of glory in his eyes, offers up his Spirit in almost the same words: "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit." If no further meaning were to be attached to those prayers than a general desire for the divine protection, why should the body, which is hereafter to partake of a glorious destiny, be unnamed? Why should not the martyrs' prayer have been "Lord Jesus, receive my soul and body," if they were alike to be precipitated into the grave, and slumber alike, until the great day on which the body is to awake—their slumber? The evident reason is, that their intermediate fates were to

*These remarks precede a Review of the following work: *Testimonies in Proof of the separate existence of the Soul in a State of Self-consciousness between Death and the Resurrection.* By the Reverend Thomas Huntingford, M. A.