

CHAPTER EIGHT

DIFFICULTIES

To a Jew there must have been something very perplexing in the prophecies regarding Messiah. The description given of Him was apparently most contradictory; and it did indeed require a simplicity and strength of faith far beyond what we suppose, to receive truths which seemed so much at variance with reason, and so irreconcilable with each other. It was not merely to a certain system of his own that they were hostile; in that case it would have been no great stretch of faith to believe what God had revealed, though it might appear totally adverse to theories which he had been laboriously constructing, it may be, from the Word of God. But these predictions were so incomprehensible, so staggering to reason, so difficult to harmonize with each other, that we cannot but wonder at the simplicity of faith with which the pious Israelites received these revelations.

They had to believe that their Messiah was to be God, yet also man; that His goings forth were to be from everlasting, yet that He was to begin his life as an infant; that He was to come from heaven, yet that He was to be born in Bethlehem; that He was to be perfectly holy, yet that He was to be the offspring of a sinful woman upon earth; that He was to be the Prince of life, yet that He was to die; that He was to be King of kings, yet that He was to hang upon a cross; that He was to be fairer than the children of men, yet that He was to be without form or comeliness. These, and innumerable other *apparent* contradictions, they were called upon to believe. How wondrous the strength of their faith! Instead of wondering at their unbelief, we are almost inclined to be amazed at their faith. At least, we may well do so when we compare their faith with ours. For we are staggering continually in unbelief at

the predictions regarding His second coming, and the apparent contradictions which they are supposed to involve; yet all these together do not present us with so many things that seem to us so inconsistent, incomprehensible, impossible, as even one of those others regarding His First Advent.

There is no argument now used to show the absurdity or impossibility of the premillennial Advent, which might not have been urged with tenfold force by a Jew in his day, against Messiah's first coming. What is the sum of these arguments? Just this; "We cannot reconcile a personal Advent and reign with the intercession of Christ in heaven. We do not see how Christ can be said to come with all His saints, if there are to be men converted after He comes. We cannot conceive how there can be an incongruous mixture upon earth as the risen saints, with their glorified bodies, and others still in mortal flesh. We cannot think of so degrading Christ as to bring Him down to earth to reign.

This is the substance of anti-millennarian arguments. These are conceived to be such insuperable difficulties that, on account of them, we ought to give up the idea of a personal Advent and reign. But what are these in comparison with those which the Jews had to encounter? Absolutely nothing.

We deny that these difficulties are insuperable. We can see much further towards a solution of them than the Jew could towards a solution of his. Nay, we think we can explain them satisfactorily. But even though we could not, are we prepared to make these our reasons for not taking the Word of God in its plain and obvious sense? Are we prepared to say to an opponent, "No doubt, your view of the passage *seems the*

more natural so far as the words and context go; but then it is irreconcilable with my ideas of the intercession of Christ, and of the dignity of Christ; and therefore I am forced to seek another meaning, even though that does not appear so natural.”

What would a believing Jew have said to this before Messiah came? Would he not say, “Are these your only reasons for turning aside from the literal sense of Scripture? If these be sufficient, then I have enough of such. I find it written that Messiah is to be born at Bethlehem; and if I were reasoning as you do, I should say, That *cannot* be; and Bethlehem must not be taken literally, for He is said to be from everlasting. Alas! What fearful havoc I should make in Scripture were I adopting your principles, and making my interpretations turn upon my ideas of the possible or the impossible, the comprehensible or the incomprehensible. In that case I must either give up my hope of a Divine, or my hope of a human Savior, for I cannot reconcile them.” Or again, what would an unbelieving Jew say to such a line of reasoning? Had Paul adopted it in arguing with his countrymen, what would have been their answer? Something of the following:—

“Your whole theory proceeds upon the principle that you cannot admit what appears to you impossible, or at variance with systems of Divine truth. Now, I hold that this doctrine of yours concerning Jesus of Nazareth is a thing incomprehensible; it is at variance with innumerable texts which speak of Messiah as a glorious King; it is utterly degrading to Him. Is it not said in Zechariah that when He shall come all His saints shall come with Him; and how can you maintain that there are to be other saints after that? The thing is impossible, on your own principles. If you will say that you are prepared to take Scripture just as you find it, whatever be the difficulties which reason or theory may present, then I confess I cannot answer you; but as long as you make Scripture to bend because it comes into collision with *your* principles, you need not wonder at my wishing it to yield when it comes into collision with *mine*.”

Upon anti-millennarian principles, I do not see how a Jew could have believed in a suffering Messiah. He must either spiritualize the passages which relate to His first coming, or be content to admit a difficulty which nothing but the event could fully solve.

We address an unbelieving Jew, and say to him, “Why do you not believe that Jesus of Nazareth is your Messiah? Do not all your prophets bear testimony to Him?” “Which of our prophets?” he might ask. We answer, “Isaiah, for instance, tells us that He was to be born a virgin; and Jesus was so born.” “But you know (he would reply) that is an impossibility, and therefore you must not take the text literally; it must mean something else.” Or, we point to the passage which speaks of His being marred more than any man; he still answers, that to take that literally is to contradict other passages, and therefore it must be explained in some other sense. Should we not, in such a case, take our stand upon the plain meaning of the words, and tell him that he was misinterpreting Scripture, and refusing to receive it because it was inconsistent with his ideas of the Messiah? We say, “May not your ideas be wrong? Are you not interposing your theory between Scripture and its natural meaning? May not your system of truth, by which you are measuring every passage, be inaccurate in some respects, or, at least, are you not overstretching it? May not these other texts, apparently contradictory, turn out after all to be quite in harmony with the others?” No. He will admit none of these suppositions. His system of truth, his theory of doctrine, is the rule he goes by, and in this balance he weighs each text that you adduce.

But suppose we were *spiritualizers* ourselves, and he were to turn round on us.

“What do you make,” he might ask, “of those passages which speak of Messiah as sitting on the throne of David, and of the whole earth enjoying peace under His dominion?”

“Oh,” we answer, “these are texts which are not to be understood literally. They must be taken in a *spiritual* sense; they mean that He is to reign in the hearts of His people, and

that there will be a great spread of religion over the earth.”

“A very good meaning, no doubt,” he might reply, “but it certainly is as far from being *the* meaning as any of my explanations which you deny; and as for this spiritual sense which you speak of, it is precisely the same kind of sense as that which you denounced in me, only you give it a more honorable name. But what *reason* can you give for rejecting the literal sense? Is it impossible? Is it absurd? Why will you not take the sense which you wish me to take? Why call me a perverter of Scripture for doing the same thing that you yourself are doing?”

“Oh, but,” we reply, “our system of truth shows us that the literal sense is an impossibility.”

“Your system of truth? Do you mean to measure Scripture by your system, and call me an unbeliever for measuring it by mine?”

“But our system of doctrine is founded upon the Word of God”

“But may it not be *founded* upon the Word of God, and yet, *as a system*, be a very insufficient standard by which to try particular texts? Is there not a danger of carrying it too far, and imagining contradictions to exist between it and Scripture where none are to be found?”

“Explain yourself.”

“Take the passages referred to about Messiah sitting on the throne of David. Is it not possible for our system to be true, and yet these texts to be literally interpreted? I believe that Messiah will reign in the hearts of His people, but I do not see how that prevents me from believing that He is to sit upon the throne of David. But, apart from this, let me ask you how you got this system by which you are measuring Scripture?”

“Oh, we got it by a careful study of the Word of God.”

“And in studying the Word to construct your system, did you take it literally or spiritually?”

“Oh, literally, of course; the words are too plain to admit of any other sense.”

“Then I think you stand self-judged.”

“How so?”

“Why, you take scripture literally in order to construct your system, and then you apply that system to prevent other scriptures from being taken literally.”

Or let me bring the matter to a closer bearing. Let me argue with the anti-millennarian. I ask, “How do you interpret such expressions as “we shall reign on earth?” [Rev. 5:10].

“Oh, spiritually, of course.”

“But why *of course*? What objection have you to take the words in their natural sense? Can you give a reason for departing from the plain meaning? It seems so plain that I wonder you should ever think of turning it aside. Are we not to abide by the literal unless there be good reasons for quitting it?”

“Yes; but there are good reasons for spiritualizing this and similar expressions.”

“What are these reasons?”

“The consequences that would result from admitting a literal interpretation.”

“But are consequences deduced by you, and after all, perhaps, very illogically, a sufficient reason for rejecting the literal sense of so many passages of Scripture? Are your ideas of what ‘ought to be,’ to be your rule of interpretation?”

“But I do not take *my* ideas, I take *God’s* ideas as my rule.”

“Well, but that is begging the whole question; for are we not enquiring what are God’s ideas as contained in this passage? You tell me that the literal meaning cannot be the true meaning, because you can prove that certain consequences must flow from it which are inconsistent with ascertained doctrine. But ought you not to be very sure that the consequences flow, before you make them a reason for such an interpretation as yours? Do you not think it possible that you may be wrong in your deductions when these are applied to things which are yet to come,—to a state of things of which we can know nothing by experience or history? May I not turn around on you and say, Your doctrine may be right, but your inferences must certainly be wrong, for they run directly in the face of the plain meaning of so many passages. *They assume the necessity of a non-natural sense in*

Scripture. I acknowledge, for instance, your doctrine as to the intercession of Christ at the Father's right hand; but when you infer from this, that intercession elsewhere is an *impossibility*, and that therefore the doctrine of His reign on earth is a fable, I interpose at once, and deny your inference. I ask you for proof. Your ideas of the nature of that intercession are nothing, if not founded upon Scripture. You say that none can be converted after Christ comes, because His intercession must cease as soon as He leaves heaven. I ask, How do you know that it must cease? Are you not attaching an importance to a *locality* which Scripture does not; an importance which I must call a very carnal one? I know that it was needful that Christ should go up to the Father's right hand to present His sacrifice and intercede; but having done that, tell me if it is unscriptural to say that He may carry on His intercession wherever the Father's purpose may require it?¹ It was the Father's purpose that He should ascend up to heaven, there to make intercession for us: and may it not be the Father's purpose that this work should be carried on upon earth when He comes again in His glory? If God has said so, who am I that I should dispute the matter with God? And the whole question is just, *has God said so?* If He has, let us believe it. It is an entire begging of the question to say that He cannot intercede anywhere else. If God sees fit, He can; and the passages in dispute are the very passages which prove that God has told us that He will."

Besides, let me ask, how were sinners saved before the ascension of Christ? Was it not

¹ "Upon supposition of the obedience of Christ in this life, and the atonement made by His blood for sin, with His exaltation thereon,—there is nothing in any essential property of the nature of God, nothing in the eternal unchangeable law of obedience to hinder, but that God might work all those things in us unto His own honor and glory, in the eternal salvation of the Church and the destruction of all its enemies without a continuance if the administration of the offices of Christ in heaven, and all that sacred solemnity of worship wherewith it is accompanied."—Owen's *Christologia*, chap. xx.

upon the credit of His intercession when He would ascend? And if, upon the credit of that intercession, sinners were saved during the four thousand years before He went up to heaven, it is a bold thing to say that none can be saved upon the credit of that intercession for the thousand years after He has left it. But did not Christ intercede on earth? And were not His intercessions there just specimens of His intercession in heaven? Divines have been accustomed to take the 17th of John as a literal and actual intercession. They have supposed that in His words on the cross, "Father, forgive them," He literally and truly "made intercession for the transgressors." They have generally supposed that He interceded during the forty days in which He remained on earth after His resurrection. But if the opinion I speak of be true, all this is an absurdity. He could not begin to intercede till He went up to heaven, and the moment that He leaves the throne, He must cease to be an intercessor! Is there a word of Scripture for this? Are there not many entirely opposed to it? And does it not show a narrow view of what intercession is? Does it not indicate an over-attachment to a locality, and a complete oversight of the real reason for locality being alluded to in intercession at all? Is there not something degrading in the idea of confining Christ's intercessory power to a particular spot; as if His influence were a contracted territorial authority, which must leave Him as soon as He crossed the boundaries of heaven?

But I must not dwell longer on this point. It is the anti-millennarian stronghold. Whether it be impregnable or not, I leave others to determine. To me it appears a setting up of *system* against *Scripture*; or, rather, something worse, a setting up of man's inferences from system against the plain words of God. It is theory *versus* Scripture. There may be difficulties in Millennarianism, but this is a wrong way of attempting to meet them. For, even granting that it relieves us of one class of difficulties, it does so by only raising up another and far more formidable class. It relieves us of systematic or inferential difficulties, only to encumber us with a host of textual and direct ones. If we adhere to

such a method, is there not danger of making the Word of God of none effect by our tradition? Is there not a danger of falling into the same errors with regard to the second Advent into which the Jews fell in reference to His first?

It may be easy to contract or elongate a passage according to the measurement of our system, but what if, in so doing, we are corrupting the words of the only wise God? Our object should be to find out what God really meant, not to discover what, according to our system, He ought to have meant.

We bring the matter to a simple test. Granting Millenarianism to be true, could it have been expressed in different language from what we have in Scripture? Granting that anti-millenarianism is true, then is not the language of Scripture most ambiguous and dark? In the former we take Scripture simply as we find it; in the latter we read it through the distorting medium of system. In the former case we are listening directly to what God is speaking to us; in the latter case, we only hear as much of His voice as our system allows.

As to another of the difficulties adverted to above, I mean the mixture of the risen saints with the mortal tenants of the earth, I have a few considerations to offer. The objection taken, is wholly founded upon *our ideas* of what is right and proper, carnal or spiritual. These are, of course, the ideas of men who cannot be expected to understand the harmony of a system still future and undeveloped. We are not in circumstances to pronounce a judgment upon the subject. We may be unable to see the propriety of such an intermixture, yet there may be in it nothing improper, nothing degrading, nothing carnal. Are we prepared to say, that God, for infinitely wise and gracious ends, might not ordain such a state of things, however strange it may appear to us? We know so little of the details of the coming age that we should be very slow to prejudge these, and very cautious in making the laws of the present a standard of the laws of the future. If ever such an objection could have been taken, it would have been in reference to the incarnation of

the Son of God, and His sojourning in the dwellings of the children of men. How carnal, how low, how degrading, that intermixture might have been pronounced,—immeasurably more so than the intercourse of risen saints and mortal men. What! the Son of God become an infant, lie in a stable, be cradled on a woman's knee, grow up as a boy in Nazareth, sit at our tables, dwell under our roofs, eat, drink, weep, sleep, speak, be clothed as we are! How carnal! Yet all this took place. Human ideas of degradation and carnality were found utterly at fault. *And may they not perchance be found equally at fault again?* I think it not unlikely that they may. Man has once erred egregiously when trying to cast the future in his own mould in preference to God's. He may now be erring no less widely and foolishly when again trying his hand at the same process. It is certainly going beyond his depth, beyond his warrant, and beyond what experience of the past is teaching him, to pronounce upon the propriety or impropriety, the carnality or the spirituality of a future condition of things,—a condition, of whose laws, whose ordinances, and whose harmonies he can know absolutely nothing, save from the *direct* Word of God.

But all this is mere negative statement. It may silence, but it may not be enough to convince. True. And the *positive* demonstration lies in the passages of Scripture which make known to us God's order and purpose in the millennial state. On these I do not mean to enter here. I am simply attempting to clear off some difficulties. Apart, however, from these Scripture proofs, on which alone a system can be built, and by which every system already builded must be tried, there are some parts of inspired history which seem to help our understanding of the matter. There has been, ever since man was upon the earth, an intermixture of what appears to me a far more perplexing kind. I mean that of angels. I do not refer to the angelic *appearances* recorded in Scripture. I admit that these fall short of proof in this difficulty. They do not touch the exact point of the objection, viz., the continual intercourse of the two classes of beings alluded to. But is this

all that is revealed of angelic visitation, angelic intercourse, angelic ministry? "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" [Heb. 1:14]. Do they not *continually* encompass us about? Are they not on our right hand and on our left, day and night? It is only occasionally that they have come forth from their invisibility, and held personal intercourse with men. Yet, though invisible, they are always with us, and, as Owen shows at great length,² watching over us, suggesting good thoughts, preserving us from evil, warding off the assaults of Satan, attending upon us in our going out and coming in. Here is an intermixture which some might pronounce carnal. And if this be going on unceasingly between holy angels and unholy men, why may not the like intercourse be carried on between perfect saints and imperfect inhabitants of earth? In this age, angels are God's messengers. But the "world to come" He hath not put into subjection to angels, but to man, even to His own Son and His risen saints. They are to be God's ministers, God's kings, God's priests, to fulfill His purposes among the children of men upon the new earth.

But there is another intermixture more carnal still, that between angels and devils. As Dr. Owen shows, one special end of the ministry of angels is to defeat and counteract the plans and assaults of Satan and his angels. Thus two vast bands are filling the air and roaming the earth together. The armies of heaven and the legions of hell are at present occupying, to a certain extent, the same sphere of operation. There must be a continual mixture, and of a kind so fearful that we shrink from dwelling on it. This mixture will cease in the millennial state. Satan will be bound, and his hosts of darkness no longer roam the air and move to and fro upon the earth. Then there will be far less of what is called carnal and degrading. For heaven and earth shall be made new. Angels and devils shall no longer meet together. But

the risen saints shall take the government of the world, executing God's purposes and fulfilling His commands. And as heaven is the proper home of angels, whence they are continually coming and going to this earth with messages of mercy or errands of judgment; so the new Jerusalem, which shall be to earth what the pillar of cloud was to Israel, shall be the habitation of the saints, out of which they shall go forth to bear rule for Christ, and administer the holy government of a holy world.

It is replied to this, that angels are invisible in their ministry amongst us, and that therefore their case proves nothing as to the difficulty in question. To this I answer, How do we know that the saints in the coming age will be *always* visible? Can they not execute their kingly office without their ever-visible pomp and glory of the present kings of earth? But besides, how is it that the visibility can alter the case or make the mixture less carnal? It is the nearness, the closeness of contact, that makes it so degrading; and how does the *invisibility* of angels remedy this? If saints are to be in "the world to come" somewhat as angels are in this, only with a higher dignity and office, then what objection can be raised against their intercourse with the inhabitants of earth in that new state of holy blessedness, which may not much more forcible apply to the ministry of angels now as they attend us day and night, passing to and fro amid the wretchedness and sin of this defiled earth?

I have thus noticed the chief difficulties which are said to lie in the way of the Millenarian system. In looking back upon these, I am astonished that there should be so few. In a state of things so new, so unlike the present, so much at variance with what the world has ever seen, we might have looked for perplexing knots and apparent contradictions. But how few are these! And these few, how trivial! Had they been tenfold stronger and more numerous, they could not have prevailed to shake the explicit revelations of God. But seeing them so feeble and so few, I both rejoice and am amazed. And oh! how soon may these jarring elements in prophecy be reconciled, and all apparent

² On the Epistle to the Hebrews, chap. I verse 14.

discord melt into blessed harmony! How speedily may the coming age evolve in unquestioned reality, and bring forth in all the perfection of the Divine symmetry, that very system which we have now to labor so hard to prove and expound to the objector,—that very system which some pronounce perplexed, incoherent, impossible, which others have not scrupled to deride as a misshapen fable, a wild and broken dream!³

³ A careful perusal of Butler's "Analogy of Religion" would tend to the removal, not only of the above difficulties, but of the ground on which they rest. "The things objected against," says the Bishop, "how foolish soever they appear to men, may be the very best means of accomplishing the very best ends."—Part ii. chap. iv. sect. 2. In his sermon "On the Ignorance of Man," we read, "We may learn with what temper of mind a man ought to inquire into the subject of religion; namely, with the expectation of finding difficulties, and with a disposition to take up and rest satisfied with any evidence whatever, *which is real*. He should, beforehand, expect things mysterious, and such as he will not be able thoroughly to comprehend or go to the bottom of. To expect a distinct comprehensive view of the whole subject, clear of difficulties and objections, is to forget our nature and condition; neither of which admit of such knowledge with respect to any science whatever. And to inquire with this

expectation is not to inquire as a man, but as one of another order of creatures. . . . It is thought necessary to be thoroughly acquainted with the whole of a scheme, even one of so narrow a compass as those which are formed by man, in order to judge of the goodness or badness of it; and the most slight and superficial view of any human contrivance comes abundantly nearer to a thorough knowledge of it, than that part which we know of the government of the world does to the general scheme and system of it, to the whole set of laws by which it is governed. From our ignorance of the constitution of things, and the scheme of Providence; from the reference which the several parts have to each other and to the whole; and from our not being able to see the end and the whole, it follows that, however perfect things are, they must necessarily appear to us less perfect than they are."

That place where once I walked below,
On Olivet I will appear:
My bleeding feet to Israel show,
While those who pierced, behold me near.
Again I will forsake my throne,
And to my footstool earth descend;
And fill the earth with peace unknown,
With glorious joy that ne'er shall end.

*Charles Wesley
on Isaiah 60:13*