

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

TWO REVELATIONS.

BY

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TWO REVELATIONS.

FOREMOST among the dogmas of the Christian faith is the one comprised in the declaration that the infinite and intelligent Being, who is alleged to rule over the universe, on one occasion, if not more, revealed himself to man, to whom he imparted important information which it would have been impossible for any of the sons of men, by their own unaided intelligence, to have acquired. To question this dogma is to plant the "thin end of the wedge" under the very foundation-stone of the Christian religion. To show the gross stupidity of the alleged Divine revelation, and the truth and potency of the revelations of science, is a task of no great novelty, but nevertheless is one which, in these days of constant and numerous accessions from the Christian fold to the ranks of Freethought, it is at once our highest wisdom and duty, from time to time, to undertake.

To weaken the influence of the Bible, it is only necessary to expose the monstrous pretensions put forward on its behalf; and of these none has had, or continues to have, so strong a hold of the orthodox Christian mind as the doctrine that the Bible is a revelation direct from the supreme ruler of the universe. Let it once be admitted that the Bible is a human production, valuable only in proportion to the truth and utility of its contents, and everything in regard to it will be changed. It will then be divested of its supposed "sacred character;" its fictitious charm will evaporate, and it will be subjected to the same critical ordeal as any other book. Unhappily, that time has not yet arrived. It is still pretended that the Bible differs from all other books in this respect—that, whereas all other books are the productions of frail human

beings possessing more or less value according to the ability and skill of the writers, the Bible is an unique work—the result of a direct and infallible revelation from Deity.

Now, there are many reasons why we should be sceptical of all alleged revelations of God to man; and the notion of an infallible revelation is most illogical and inconsistent. It need not be disputed that, if God is infinite in power, he could reveal himself if he felt so disposed. But, suppose God were to reveal himself, it is questionable whether man, with finite capacities, could understand an “infallible revelation;” or, even if he understood it, that he could infallibly interpret it to others. For it must be obvious to the dullest mind that, presuming God to be an infinite being, and that he revealed himself to man, it could not have been as an infinite being that he so revealed himself, man having no capacity for understanding the infinite, except as the antithesis of the finite. And if God revealed his will to any individual man, that man could only understand and interpret it up to the measure of his capacity; so that, if it left Deity as an infallible expression of his will, without the operation of a most stupendous organic change—viz., that of giving infinite capacity to a finite being—there would be no guarantee that it was infallibly understood or perfectly interpreted to others. Moreover, if God has revealed his will to man, he must have revealed it in some language; and, even supposing that it had been perfectly expressed, it would have been a revelation only to those who heard it, or, in a limited sense, to those who understood the tongue in which it was expressed. On the other hand, if God, instead of personally revealing himself, had written his will in the heavens, so that all men might observe it, still he must have written it there in some language; and, as we have no evidence that the human race has ever spoken an universal tongue, there would always be the liability of its being an unknown tongue to many, or of its being imperfectly translated, and in a measure misunderstood.

With these strong objections to revelation firmly impressed on our mind, we may go to the consideration of the alleged revealed record. And what shall we find? A mass of statements that accord with the careful observations of the wisest among mankind? Not so; the very reverse of this.

We have nothing but statements that are in direct conflict with the universal experience of mankind, false in regard to its science, history, and philosophy, hopelessly confused in its figures, and bad in respect to its morality.

Of the cosmogony of Genesis it need only be remarked that it is believed only by those who hold faith to be a higher faculty than reason, and pretend that it is not unreasonable to maintain that an infinite and omnipotent Deity could make the universe "out of nothing." The most thoughtful even among Christians now admit that there is a great deal in the objection of scientists, that we know nothing of the origination of substance nor of its destruction, but only of a long series of changes practically infinite.

The Bible astronomy, its geology, and biology are alike absurd, being diametrically opposed to the ripest knowledge of our best scientists, and in conflict with the daily experience of mankind. No schoolboy in the fourth standard but now knows the falsity of Biblical astronomy, and could as easily demonstrate that the sun could not have been created on the "fourth day" as that the doctrine of the "blessed Trinity" and the rule of three are not consistent with each other. Recently Mr. Gladstone advanced the ludicrously indefensible theory that the sun was made on the first day, but that the inspired writers did not mention it as being in existence until the fourth—or, in other words, that the sun existed on the first day, but that it was not turned on, like a modern sun-burner, to give light to the earth until the fourth day. As, however, the sun is the great central attractive power round which our earth with several other planets revolve, this theory will scarcely bear the test of serious examination. As to revealed geology, the theologian finds it necessary, in order to reconcile the Bible with modern science, to extend a day of twenty-four hours into a period of indefinite duration, and, in so doing, without removing a single difficulty, he only renders the "revelation" the more incredible. How the difficulty, that grass and herbs could not survive an hour without the sun, is removed by prolonging that sunless period indefinitely, is past human understanding, and must be relegated to the region of blind credulity or religious faith.

A serious attempt to reconcile Genesis with the geological epochs, like Dr. Kinns's book, may be regarded in the

light of a huge joke—the same in kind as, and differing only in a very slight degree from, the attempt of Mr. Pickwick to demonstrate the vast antiquity of the curious inscription on the stone discovered by the Pickwickians in one of their famous excursions. Nor is Mr. Gladstone more successful than Dr. Kinns when he attempts the same impossible task. A few facts of geology, skilfully marshalled by Professor Huxley, pulverise the pious opinion of the great statesman, that the Biblical account of the cosmogony is in exact accordance with modern science. If any fact has been brought to light by the researches of geology, it is that the order of living creatures has been (1) crustacea, (2) fishes, (3) reptiles and birds, (4) mammals generally, and (5) man; but the Mosaic order is threefold—(1) fishes and birds, (2) mammals and reptiles, and (3) man. We have millions and billions of fossil shells in the Cambrian period, long before the existence of fishes; then the great fish period of the Devonian period; then the saurian period; long afterwards come the archaic animals of the mammoth family; then those still nearer approaching the types of animals belonging to the history of man; and finally man, with his contemporaries. Six periods instead of three.

In the study of geology we find the flora and fauna of one period differing greatly from that immediately preceding it—an appreciable gulf separating the animals of one age from those of another. Within six days we have, according to Moses, all living creatures created, from the sea-worms and great marine lizards to the vertebrate animals, including even man himself.

No line of demarcation showing the great periods of time that must have elapsed in the evolution of the lower to the higher forms of life, which all true science now demands, can be found in Genesis, and for this very obvious reason: because the writer of Genesis was wholly ignorant of any such evolution, and the all-wise Deity apparently neglected to supply the information, when he revealed to his chosen servant his method and manner of creation.

Equally unsatisfactory is the Bible view of biology. All the races of the earth are practically alleged to have sprung from Noah and his three sons; but, remembering the long period over which the history of China and India

stretches—a history written in monuments of stone and wood—it is impossible for any intelligent person who has seriously considered the subject with a view of arriving at truth to give credence to teaching which makes the human family less than six thousand years old. How infinitely trivial is all this when compared with the revelations of science—revelations which the study of man has extracted from Nature herself. How insignificant is the Mosaic view of astronomy, when viewed side by side with modern knowledge! From a comparatively small luminary, placed in the heavens to give light to this earth during the day, the sun is seen to be a vast body, 880,000 miles in diameter. The little twinkling stars are magnified into great bodies, many in magnitude vaster than our sun, and at such immense distances that the light of some of them has not yet reached our earth. In our own system we have Jupiter, hundreds of times larger than our earth, with four moons dancing constant attendance upon her; in addition to which we have Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, and Mars, all older, and three of them larger, than the earth which we inhabit.

“It is difficult,” says Colenso, “to realise to ourselves the enormous size and distance from us of the fixed stars, and the awful solitude in which each separate star and its little troop of planets exists by itself in the midst of the mighty universe.” Perhaps the following calculation may assist the reader’s mind to grasp more distinctly and appreciate more fully the grandeur of the heavenly host: “One travelling at railway speed, day and night, $33\frac{1}{3}$ miles an hour, or 100 miles in 3 hours, would reach the moon in 300 days, and at the same rate he would reach the sun in 330 years. But, if he could reach the sun in one single day, it would take 550 years of such travelling to reach the nearest fixed star. And then it must be remembered that the enormous interval, on every side of our sun and its little family, is an awful void of animal and vegetable life. A similar tremendous void must recur between one star and another, and on all sides around each separate star—nay, around each separate mote of nebular star dust.” Now, as far as can be ascertained, the nearest fixed star is twenty-one billions of miles from our earth; the next nearest being thirty-seven billions of miles distant; while Sirius is no less than eighty-two billions of

miles away. Nor is this by any means the most distant, for the Polar star is calculated to be two hundred and ninety-two billions of miles distant, and Capella one hundred and thirty-three billion miles still further off.

To return again to the sun, which is the grand centre and animating principle of the planetary system, around which the various planets revolve, and the attractive power by which they are sustained in their orbits—in short, the source of light and heat and all that renders the earth fit for habitation. In magnitude the sun is so vast that figures fail to convey any adequate idea of its immensity. As, however, arithmetical numbers and illustrations are the only means open to us in which to indicate the vast magnitude of this body, I may as well say that its diameter is estimated to be no less than 880,000 miles. Its circumference, or line going quite round it, is 2,764,600 miles; while its surface contains 2,432,800,000,000 of square miles, or, in other words, twelve thousand times the number of square miles on our globe. It has been further estimated that its solid contents comprehend 356,818,739,200,000,000, or three hundred and fifty-six thousand billion of cubical miles—that is, 1,350,000 times the number of solid miles which our terraqueous globe contains; so that it would take 1,350,000 globes as large as our earth to equal the size of the sun. The distance of the sun from our earth is 95,000,000 of miles. Or, to take a familiar illustration: a cannon-ball travelling at its utmost speed is calculated to fly through the air at the rate of 500 miles an hour. Going continuously at this speed, the cannon-ball would reach the sun in twenty-one years, two hundred and forty-five days. Or, again, suppose a train to travel at the rate of four hundred and eighty miles a day, it would require five hundred and forty-seven years of such travelling to reach the sun. In view of these facts, is it not preposterous to suppose that the sun and the stars were not created until the fourth day? How could the earth—nay, the whole of the planets in our system—exist for a single instant without the sun, the great centre of attraction, the great heavenly loadstone which holds them in their respective orbits, and keeps them continuously spinning along in space? How could herbs and grass grow before the existence of the sun? Moreover, if it took deity six days to complete the creation of this world—infinitesimally

small as compared with other heavenly bodies—how much longer would it have required to create the numberless stars that stud the universe, the magnitude and distance of which no words can express?

Geology, instead of showing an earth that has existed only a few thousand years, makes us acquainted with the fossil remains of animals that must have existed thousands of years before Jehovah thought of communicating his opinion on these subjects to Moses, or any other of the inspired Bible-makers of the earth. And, while geology thus opens up for us a vast field for study which inevitably leads to the revelation of the "unity of nature," biology joins hands to demonstrate the great antiquity of the human race and the relation of man to the lower animals, tracing all forms of life down to its lowest condition—the protoplasmic germ.

By a study of geology we learn to distinguish the epochs or ages that mark the various changes in the earth's condition by reference to the rock systems which constitute the crust of the earth. They are as follows, beginning from the lowest or first formed :—

1. The Metamorphic system.
2. Laurentian system.
3. Cambrian system.
4. Silurian system.
5. Old Red Sandstone system.
6. Carboniferous system (Devonian).
7. Permian system.
8. P. Triassic system.
9. Oolitic system (Jurassic).
10. Chalk system (Cretaceous).
11. Tertiary system.
12. Superficial Deposits.

Each of these systems, consisting of many beds of rock, would require ages of long duration for its formation; yet even the whole lumped together would cover but a part—and perhaps only a small part—of the earth's history. Since the termination of the rock systems the present tribes of plants and animals have come into existence; and it will be seen that the stages of development through which they have passed have been exceedingly

slow—so much so that the evolution of one species into another is, for the most part, quite imperceptible.

Though the earth has undergone many transformations since the first geological epoch, no doubt can exist in any thoughtful mind that, in its general features, it remains the same. Sea and land, atmosphere and light, rains and winds, summer and winter, have remained pretty well the same. Fishes, birds, and quadrupeds have lived for æons, and preyed upon each other, as they now do. These, though altering from time to time, the sea and land often changing positions, remain the component parts of the world as we know it this day.

Taking the earliest series of stratified rocks—those that are found above the granite—no life-remains are discoverable in them. This series, having been brought into their present condition by being subject to continuous burning, are for that reason called "Igneous Rocks."

In the Laurentian system, so called from the St. Lawrence of North America, only the very lowest form of life-remains have been found: something approaching in simplicity to a spreading bunch of coral. Sea-weeds, zoophytes, burrowing worms, and shrimp-like animals are yielded in the Cambrian. In the Silurian are found the remains of a number of marine creatures, numerous species of zoophytes, or animals allied to the "sea pen," corals, crinoids, some species of shell fish, worms, and crustacea. Marine plants, seed weeds, and the Trilobite—a curious creature, in every respect a well-developed crustacean, covered with shelly plates, terminating variously behind in a flexible extremity, and furnished with a headpiece composed of larger plates; eyes of a very complicated structure, which, according to the best fossil anatomists, were fitted with no less than 400 spherical lenses—are also found here.

In the following age we have the Crinoidea and the Cephalopods.

In the fifth epoch (blocked sandstone) appear a large number of now extinct fishes, such as the Placoidians and the Ganoidians.

The Carboniferous age is chiefly remarkable for the production of a land vegetation called coal, no new form of animal life being discernible during this period; but when we come to the New Red Sandstone we find novel

and superior forms of plant and animal life appear, though the greatest and most marked departure occurred in the Oolitic age, when, for the first time, insects are brought upon the scene, and such extraordinary reptiles as the Saurians, or lizard family.

Of these saurians that curiously-formed creature known as the Ichthyosaurus is well worth a passing notice. This gigantic saurian had the backbone of a fish, the long tail of a crocodile, the snout of a porpoise, the head of a lizard, with a large number of strong teeth, large eyes, and the paddles of a whale, which enabled it to propel itself rapidly through the water. The remains of these creatures show that they varied between twenty and thirty feet in length. Later, we find what are called land or crocodile lizards, such as the Megalosaurus and the Pterodactyle, or Flying Dragon.

According to Dr. Buckland, in this age are to be found on the surface of slabs, of calcareous grit and stonified slate, "perfectly preserved, petrified castings of marine worms;" and, though traces of the footprints of animals may be found on the surfaces of these rocks, there are no indications during this period of the existence of man. By reference to these footprints the existence of birds at this early period of the world's history has been pretty well established; and it is probable that a gigantic kind of gallinaceous bird, larger even than the ostrich, waddled about the earth, to the danger, perhaps, of birds of smaller size.

Rock salt is found in the Triassic age, and on the top of the Oolite formation are found innumerable beds of what is familiarly known as limestone in some parts of England and Germany, several hundreds of feet in thickness. Professor Huxley and other well-known scientists consider the formation of this substance due mainly to the "siliceous coverings of animalcules;" the remains of some of which animals have been discovered in these beds.

But we must pass rapidly on, and come to the Tertiary system. In this age we come across great rock formations such as the Tripoli, now believed to be composed exclusively of the solid remains of animalcules, so minute in structure as to be imperceptible to the human eye without the aid of a microscope. We are now introduced to several orders of reptiles, such as the Chelonia (tortoises),

Crocodilia and Batrachia (frogs), and birds of the genera, represented by the owl, woodcock, quail, etc. ; while among the quadrupeds were the Palæotherium, the Glyptodon (a sort of armadillo), and the Anoplotheria, in addition to certain of the wolf, fox, racoon, doormouse, and squirrel tribes.

In what is termed the Miocene period of the Tertiary formation are found the remains of the gigantic Dinotherium and of the Hippotherium, an animal allied to the horse, hogs, cats, and animals, bearing resemblance to the tiger, the dog, and bear ; while the sea was alive with marine mammalia, such as whales, seals, dolphins, and so on.

Characterising the Pliocene age, which is again divided into two periods, we find the remains of Pachydermatous families, such as the mammoth, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus, take the place of the extinct thick-skinned animals before mentioned, and traces appear of the existence of some ruminants, such as oxen, deer, and camels. It has now been established that the great Mastadon, a skeleton of which was dug out of the earth in America so recently as 1801, belongs to this period ; as does also the Megatherium, a huge creature, slow in movement, and larger somewhat than the common ox, with tremendous toes and claws ; while, in the second half of this period, a number of animals have been discovered similar to species now existing ; and from this period downwards progress towards the present types of the animal world becomes more and more manifest.

Now, if the earth has existed only some six thousand years, and if, as Genesis states, everything was created within six days, how is it that the remains of animals, of various stages of growth or development, are to be found thus embedded in the rocks ? How is it that the Bible makes no mention of the extraordinary creatures named, the ancestors of the animals now existing on the earth ? Besides, if we would study aright the age of the earth, we must not fail to take into account the important discovery of William Pengelly in Kent's Cavern. "We know," says this scientist, in his lecture on "The Time that has Elapsed Since the Era of the Cave Men of Devonshire," "that in Kent's Cavern there are inscriptions on the granular stalagmite ; and we know

further that the lines of drainage of the cavern have not changed. Now, if it has taken 250 years to form the twentieth of an inch in thickness in a part of a cavern where the stalagmite has been formed with unusual rapidity, judging from these bosses, you perceive clearly enough that it would take twenty times that amount of time at that rate to represent an inch—that is, 5,000 years, and we have fully five feet to account for in the granular stalagmite only. Now, ladies and gentlemen, are you prepared for that amount of time? Five thousand years for an inch, and sixty inches—sixty times five thousand years!”

Dealing with the Palæontological evidence, the same authority enumerates the kind of animals found in the earth. They were “the cave lion, felis of the size of the lynx, wild cat, cave hyena, wolf, fox, canis vulpes var spelæus, canis of the size of isatis, glutton, badger, cave bear, grizzly bear, brown bear, mammoth, rhinoceros, tichorhinus, horse, urus or wild bull, bison, ‘irish elk,’ red deer, reindeer, hare, lagomys spelæus, water vole, field vole, bank vole, arvicola gulielmi, beaver, and machairodus latideus.” Here we have three groups of animals—many extinct; some, though not extinct, only to be found on the continent, and others, such as the fox and the hare, still existing in Great Britain.

Biological research proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that man’s existence on the earth dates not 5,000, nor 50,000, but probably hundreds of thousands of years, and Karl Vogt, the great German scientist, goes as far as saying that “there is no longer any doubt that man existed in Europe—probably the latest peopled part of the world—at a time when the great southern animals—the elephant, mammoth, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus—were found there. Even when no human remains or tools have been found the acute researches of Steenstrap have found traces of man by distinguishing the bones, which have been gnawed by animals from those which show signs of having been split by man for the sake of the marrow, or otherwise handled by him” (*Anthropological Review*, page 219); a statement corroborated by Sir Charles Lyell in his “Antiquity of Man,” page 204, and also maintained by Professor Huxley and other leading scientists of the day.

It is of no avail for theologians to declare that the

passages in the first chapter of Genesis are susceptible of bearing the interpretation that ages elapsed between the creation of the vegetable kingdom and man. The Bible says that the evening and the morning was "the first day," and we refuse to confuse ourselves and others over the meaning of a verse which ought to be clear to every person possessing only a grain of common sense. This portion of my subject I close with a quotation from the late Bishop Colenso, with which I entirely agree. He says: "We have thus seen that in Genesis i., if regarded as statements of historical matter of fact, are directly at variance with some of the plainest facts of natural science, as they are now brought home, by the extension of education, to every village, almost we might say to every cottage in the land. It is idle for any minister of religion to attempt to disguise this palpable discordance. To do this is only to put a stumbling block in the way of the young—at all events of those of the next generation—who well instructed themselves in these things, and, having their eyes open to the real facts of the case, may be expected either to despise such a teacher as ignorant, or to suspect him as dishonest, and in either case would be very little likely to attach much weight to his instructions in things of highest moment" (Bishop Colenso, in "Examination of Pentateuch," page 324). But, if we turn our attention from the narrow and puerile view of the Bible to the large and comprehensive view of science, we shall find that the universe is in reality the one great open book—a revelation to man just up to the measure of his capability of reading and understanding it. The diligent and earnest student of Nature day by day grasps some new fact, and, speculating upon its value, opens up new mines of thought for future exploration. It is worthy of remark, too, that Nature is a book that is open to all peoples; it recognises no distinction of colour, or nationality, or sex; it is free to impart its wonders to all who are prepared to read its ever-unfolding pages. Better far than any revelation contained in the numerous bibles of the earth; for these, though containing the best guesses at truth that man could make in past ages of ignorance, could not in their very nature contain an infallible record of Nature's final words to man. Never for a moment silent, this universe, in its ceaseless changes, is ever ready to deliver its message to whosoever is

willing to receive it—a message that is exactly suitable to the progressive nature of man ; it is delivered, not all at once, but in piecemeal ; for, as man is incapable of grasping or understanding all the truths of Nature at once, she is slow and persistent in the gradual but everlasting unfolding of her wondrous book.

These natural revelations, moreover, are never finished. The knowledge of one age becomes the ignorance of the next, as surely as the heresy of to-day will become the orthodoxy of to-morrow ; for, with an ever-widening grasp of facts, the half-truth that was known yesterday will bear a new meaning in the light of the additional half that has been discovered to-day. Well, indeed, is it for man that he acquires his knowledge thus by small, but never-ending, instalments. Just as a story loses its charm to the reader the moment the plot is disclosed, or interest wanes as the reader can, with some degree of certainty, predict the course of events as they are likely to affect the hero or heroine, so life would lose its charm, its chief source of happiness, its motive-power, if man could interpret now for all time the meaning of Nature's wonders. Fortunately for man, such knowledge is not possible. Could he live for a thousand years, there would always be some fresh lessons for him to learn ; and, though there is a limit to his power of grasping the meaning of Nature's truths, the facts within his reach are so numerous that he need never seek in vain. Not by spasmodic effort, nor by any series of such efforts, can he encompass all truth that to him is knowable. Only by ceaseless accumulation of facts, only by a careful classification of those facts, only by well-reasoned deductions, can man hope to understand their real significance. As the great mountains of the earth are but the deposits, through thousands of ages, of small particles of matter that, from their inherent properties, have thus been drawn together, so is the knowledge of man : every moment there is a fresh deposit of facts for him who will study, and the great accumulations of the past make up the sum of man's knowledge to-day. The universe is a great panorama ; it is continually unfolding new pictures to satisfy our mental cravings, and this unfolding seems likely to go on forever.

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