INTRODUCTION.

CONTAINING A BRIEF ACCOUNT ON THE STATE OF THE WORLD
AT THE TIME OF CHRIST'S APPEARANCE UPON EARTH.

SECTION I.

When Jesus Christ made his appearance on earth, a
great part of the world was subject to the Roman empire.
This empire was much the largest temporal monarchy that
had ever existed; so that it was called, "all the world." (Luke i. 1.) The time when the Romans first subdued
the land of Judea, was between sixty and seventy years
before Christ was born; and soon after this the Roman
empire rose to its greatest extent and splendour. To this
government the world continued subject till Christ came,
and many hundred years afterwards. The remoter
nations who had submitted to the yoke of this mighty em-
prise, were ruled either by Roman governors, invested with
temporary commissions, or by their own princes and laws,
in subordination to the republic, whose sovereignty was ac-
nowledged, and to which the conquered kings, who were
continued in their own dominions, owed their borrowed
majesty. At the same time the Roman people and their
venerable senate, though they had not lost all shadow of
liberty, were yet in reality reduced to a state of servile
submission to Augustus Cæsar; who by artifice, perfidy,
and bloodshed, attained an enormous degree of power, and
united in his own person the pompous titles of Emperor,
Pontiff, Censor, Tribune of the people: in a word, all the
great offices of the state.*

* Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History, vol. i. p. 16.
At this period the Romans, according to Daniel's prophetic description, had trodden down the kingdoms, and by their exceeding strength devoured the whole earth. However, by enslaving the world, they civilized it; and whilst they oppressed mankind, they united them together. The same laws were every where established, and the same languages understood. Men approached nearer to one another in sentiments and manners; and the intercourse between the most distant regions of the earth was rendered secure and agreeable. Hence the benign influence of letters and philosophy was spread abroad in countries which had been before enveloped in the darkest ignorance.\(^*\)

Just before Christ was born, the Roman empire not only rose to its greatest height, but was also settled in peace. Augustus Caesar had been for many years establishing the state of the Roman empire, and subduing his enemies, till the very year that Christ was born: then all his enemies being reduced to subjection, his dominion over the world appeared to be settled in its greatest glory. This remarkable peace, after so many ages of tumult and war, was a fit prelude to the ushering of the glorious Prince of Peace into the world.\(^*\) The tranquillity which then reigned was necessary to enable the ministers of Christ to execute with success their sublime commission to the human race. In the situation into which the providence of God had brought the world, the gospel in a few years reached those remote corners of the earth into which it could not otherwise have penetrated for many ages.

All the heathen nations, at the time of Christ's appearance on earth, worshipped a multiplicity of gods and demons, whose favour they courted by obscene and ridiculous ceremonies, and whose anger they endeavoured to appease by the most abominable cruelties.\(^+\)

Every nation had its respective gods, over which one more excellent than the rest presided; yet in such a manner that the supreme deity was himself controlled by the rigid decrees of fate, or by what the philosophers called eternal necessity. The gods of the east were different.

\(^*\) Robertson's Sermon on the Situation of the World at the time of Christ's appearance.  
\(^+\) See Mosheim and Robertson.
from those of the Gauls, the Germans, and other northern nations. The Greecian divinities differed from those of the Egyptians, who deified plants, and a great variety of the productions both of nature and art. Each people had also their peculiar manner of worshipping and appeasing its respective deities. In process of time, however, the Greeks and Romans grew as ambitious in their religious pretensions as in their political claims. They maintained that their gods, though under different appellations, were the objects of religious worship in all nations; and therefore they gave the names of their deities to those of other countries.*

The deities of almost all nations were either ancient heroes, renowned for noble exploits and worthy deeds, or kings and generals who had founded empires, or women who had become illustrious by remarkable actions or useful inventions. The merit of those eminent persons, contemplated by their posterity with enthusiastic gratitude, was the cause of their exaltation to celestial honours. The natural world furnished another kind of deities; and as the sun, moon, and stars, shine with a lustre superior to that of all other material beings, they received religious homage from almost all the nations of the world.†

From those beings of a nobler kind, idolatry descended into an enormous multiplication of inferior powers; so that in many countries, mountains, trees, and rivers, the earth, and sea, and wind, nay, even virtues and vices, and diseases, had their shrines attended by devout and zealous worshippers.‡

These deities were honoured with rites and sacrifices of various kinds, according to their respective nature and

† The learned Mr. Bryant, in his analysis of ancient mythology, supposes that the worship of the powers of nature, principally the sun, was the original idolatry, which prevailed in all nations; that the characters of the pagan deities of different countries melt into each other; and that the whole crowd of gods and goddesses mean only the powers of nature, (especially the sun) branched out and diversified by a number of different names and attributes. Sir William Jones, in his history of the antiquities of Asia, appears to have embraced the same opinion. See Bryant, vol. i. p. 2,308. See also Sir William Jones’s Dissertation of the gods of Greece, Italy, and India.
‡ Mosheim, vol. i. p. 20.
offices. Most nations offered animals; and human sacrifices were universal in ancient times. They were in use among the Egyptians till the reign of Amasis: they were never so common among the Greeks and Romans; yet they were practised by them on extraordinary occasions. Porphyry says that the Greeks were wont to sacrifice men when they went to war. He relates also that human sacrifices were offered at Rome till the reign of Adrian, who ordered them to be abolished in most places.

Pontiffs, priests, and ministers, distributed into several classes, presided over the pagan worship, and were appointed to prevent disorder in the performance of religious rites. The sacerdotal order, which was supposed to be distinguished by an immediate intercourse and friendship with the gods, abused its authority in the basest manner, to deceive an ignorant and wretched people.

The religious worship of the pagans was confined to certain times and places. The statues, and other representations of the gods, were placed in the temples, and supposed to be animated in an incomprehensible manner; for they carefully avoided the imputation of worshipping manimulate beings; and therefore pretended that the divinity represented by the statue was really present in it, if the dedication were truly and properly made.

Besides the public worship of the gods, to which all without exception were admitted, they were certain religious rites celebrated in secret by the Greeks, and several eastern countries, to which a small number was allowed access. These were called mysteries; and persons who

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* Dr. Priestley’s Discourses relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion.

† Notwithstanding the ignorance which prevailed respecting religion, the Augustan was the most learned and polite age the world ever saw. The love of literature was the universal passion.

‡ Mosheim, vol. i. p. 22.

§ The vulgar were carefully excluded from these secrets, which were reserved for the nobility and sacerdotal tribe. The priests, who had devised these allegories, understood their original import, and bequeathed them as an inestimable legacy to their children. In order to celebrate these mysteries with the greater secrecy, the temples were so constructed as to favour the artifice of the priests. The fuses, in which they used to execute their sacred functions, and perform the ceremonies of their religion, were subterraneous mansions, constructed with such
desired an initiation were obliged previously to exhibit satisfactory proofs of their fidelity and patience, by passing through various trials and ceremonies of the most disagreeable kind. The secret of these mysteries was kept in the strictest manner, as the initiated could not reveal anything that passed in them, without exposing their lives to the most imminent danger.

These secret doctrines were taught in the mysteries of Eleusis, and in those of Bacchus, and other divinities; but the reigning religion was totally external. It held out no body of doctrines, no public instruction to participate on stated days in the established worship. The only faith required was, to believe that the gods exist, and reward virtue either in this life or in that to come; the only practice, to perform at intervals some religious acts, such as appearing in the solemn festivals, and sacrificing at the public altars.†

The spirit and genius of the pagan religion was not calculated to promote moral virtue. Stately temples, expensive sacrifices, pompous ceremonies, and magnificent festivals, were the objects presented to its votaries. But just notions of God, obedience to his moral laws, purity of heart, and sanctify of life, were not once mentioned as ingredients in religious service. No repentance of past crimes, and no future amendment of conduct, were ever prescribed by the pagans, as proper means of appeasing their offended deities. Sacrifice a chosen victim, bow, down before a hallowed image, be initiated in the sacred mysteries, and the wrath of the gods shall be averted—the thunder shall drop from their hands.†

The gods and goddesses to whom public worship was paid, exhibited to their adorers examples of egregious crimes, rather than of useful and illustrious virtues. It was permitted to consider Jupiter, the father of the gods, as an usurper, who expelled his father from the throne of the universe, and who was in his turn to be one day driven

wonderful dexterity, that every thing which appeared in them breathed an air of solemn secrecy. See Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. xii. p. 501.

† Travels of Attalus in the Younger in Greece, by the Abbe Barthélemy, vol. ii. p. 311. † Robertson.
from it by his son. The priests were little solicitous to animate the people to virtuous conduct, either by precept or example; they plainly enough declared that all which was essential to the true worship of the gods was contained in the rites and institutions which the people had received by tradition from their ancestors. Hence the wiser part of mankind, about the time of Christ's birth, looked upon the whole system of religion as a just object of ridicule and contempt.

The consequence of this state of theology was an universal corruption of manners, which discovered itself in the impunity of the most flagitious crimes. The colours are not too strong which the apostle employs in drawing the character of the heathens. Rom. i. 21, 22. Eph. iv. 17, 18, 19.

At the time of Christ's appearance on earth, the religion of the Romans, as well as their arms, had extended itself throughout a great part of the world. Those nations who before their subjection had their own gods, and their own particular religious institutions, were persuaded by degrees to admit into their worship a great variety of the sacred rites and customs of the conquerors.

When from the sacred rites of the ancient Romans we pass to review the other religions which prevailed in the world, it will appear obvious that the most remarkable may be properly divided into two classes; one of which will comprehend the religious systems which owe their existence to political views, and the other of those which seem to have been formed for military purposes. The religions of most of the eastern nations may be ranked in the former class, especially that of the Persians, Egyptians and Indians, which appear to have been solely calculated for the preservation of the state, the support of the royal authority and grandeur, the maintenance of public peace, and the advancement of civil virtues. The religious system of the northern nations may be comprehended under the military class, since all the traditions among the Germans, the Britons, the Celts, and the Goths, concerning their divinities, have a manifest tendency to excite and nourish

fortitude, ferocity, an insensibility of danger and contempt of life."

At this time Christianity broke forth from the east like a rising sun, and dispelled the universal religious darkness which obscured every part of the globe. "The noblest people (says Dr. Robertson) that ever entered upon the stage of the world, appear to have been only instruments in the divine hand for the execution of wise purposes concealed from themselves. The Roman ambition and bravery paved the way, and prepared the world for the reception of the Christian doctrine. They fought and conquered, that it might triumph with the greater ease. (See Isa. x. 7)"

By means of their victories the overruling providence of God established an empire, which really possesses that perpetuity and eternal duration which they vainly arrogated to their own. He erected a throne which shall continue for ever; and of the increase of that government there shall be no end."

It has been mentioned, to the honour of Christianity, that it rose and flourished in a learned, inquiring, and discerning age: and made the most rapid and amazing progress through the immense empire of Rome to its remotest limbs, when the world was in its most civilized state, and in an age that was universally distinguished for science and erudition.

SECTION II.

The state of the Jews was not much better than that of other nations, at the time of Christ's appearance on earth. They were governed by Herod, who was himself tributary to the Roman people. His government was of the most vexatious, and oppressive kind. By a cruel, suspicious, and overbearing temper, he drew upon himself the aversion of all, not excepting those who lived upon his bounty.

Under his administration, and through his influence, the
luxury of the Romans was introduced into Palestine, accompanied with the vices of that licentious people. In a word, Judea, governed by Herod, groaned under all the corruption which might be expected from the authority and example of a prince, who, though a Jew in outward profession, was, in point of morals and practice, a contemner of all laws human and divine.

After the death of this tyrant, the Romans divided the government of Judea between his sons. In this division one half of the kingdom was given to Archelaus, under the title of Exarch. Archelaus was so corrupt and wicked a prince, that at last both Jews and Samaritans joined in a petition against him to Augustus, who banished him from his dominions about ten years after the death of Herod the Great. Judea was by this sentence reduced to a Roman province, and ordered to be taxed.

The governors whom the Romans appointed over Judea were frequently changed, but seldom for the better. About the sixteenth year of Christ, Pontius Pilate was appointed a governor, the whole of whose administration, according to Josephus, was one continual scene of venality, rapine, and of every kind of savage cruelty. Such a governor was ill calculated to appease the ferment occasioned by the late tax. Indeed Pilate was so far from attempting to appease, that he greatly inflamed them, by taking every occasion of introducing his standard, with images, pictures, and consecrated shields, into their city; and at last by attempting to drain the treasure of the temple, under pretense of bringing an aqueduct into Jerusalem. The most remarkable transaction of his government, however, was the condemnation of Jesus Christ; seven years after which he was removed from Judea.

However severe the authority which the Romans exercised over the Jews, yet it did not extend to the entire suppression of their civil and religious privileges. The Jews were in some measure governed by their own laws, and permitted the enjoyment of their religion. The administration of religious ceremonies was committed as before to

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the high priest, and to the sanhedrim; to the former of whom the order of priests and levites was in the usual subordination; and the form of outward worship, except in a very few points, suffered no visible change. But, on the other hand, it is impossible to express the disquietude and disgust, the calamities and vexations, which this unhappy nation suffered from the presence of the Romans, whom their religion obliged them to regard as a polluted and idolatrous people; particularly from the avarice and cruelty of the pretors, and the frauds and extortions of the publicans: so that, all things considered, their condition who lived under the government of the other sons of Herod, was much more supportable than the state of those who were immediately subject to the Roman jurisdiction.♦

It was not, however, from the Romans only that the calamities of this miserable people proceeded. Their own rulers multiplied their vexations, and debauched them from enjoying any little comforts which were left them by the Roman magistrates. The leaders of the people, and the chief priests, were, according to the account of Josephus, profligate wretches, who had purchased their places by bribes, or by other acts of iniquity, and who maintained their ill-acquired authority by the most abominable crimes. The inferior priests, and those who possessed any shadow of authority, were become dissolute and abandoned to the highest degree. The multitude, excited by these corrupt examples, ran headlong into every kind of iniquity; and by their endless seditions, robberies, and extortions, armed against themselves both the justice of God and vengeance of man.†

About the time of Christ's appearance, the Jews of that age concluded the period pre-determined by God to be then completed, and that the promised Messiah would suddenly appear. Devout persons waited day and night for the consolation of Israel; and the whole nation, groaning under the Roman yoke, and stimulated by the desire of liberty or of vengeance, expected their deliverer with the most anxious impatience.

Nor were these expectations peculiar to the Jews. By

♦ Mosheim.  † Mosheim, vol. 1. p. 33.
their dispersion among so many nations, by their conversation with the learned men among the heathens, and by the translations of their inspired writings into a language almost universal, the principles of their religion were spread all over the east. It became the common belief that a Prince would arise at that time in Judæa, who would change the face of the world, and extend his empire from one end of the earth to the other.

The whole body of the people looked for a powerful and warlike deliverer, who they supposed would free them from the Roman authority. All considered the whole of religion as consisting in the rites appointed by Moses, and in the performance of some external acts of duty. All were unanimous in excluding the other nations of the world from the hopes of eternal life.

Two religions flourished at this time in Palestine, the Jewish and Samaritan. The Samaritans blended the errors of paganism with the doctrines of the Jews.

The learned among the Jews were divided into a great variety of sects; the Pharisees, the Sadducees, Essenes, &c. whose peculiarities will be explained under each denomination in the Dictionary.

Whilst the learned and sensible part of the Jewish nation was divided into a variety of sects, the multitude was sunk into the most deplorable ignorance of religion; and had no conception of any other method of rendering themselves acceptable to God, than by sacrifices, washings, and other external rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic law. Hence proceeded that dissoluteness of manners which prevailed among the Jews during Christ's ministry on earth. Hence also the divine Saviour compares the people to sheep without a shepherd, and their doctors to men who, though

* Robertson.—About this period the pagans expected some great king, or glorious person, to be born. Hence Virgil, the Roman poet, who lived at this time, in his fourth eclogue, describes the blessings of the government of some great person, who was, as he should be born about this time, in language agreeable to the Jewish prophet's description of the Messiah and his kingdom.

† This has been done in the present Edition, partly for ease of reference, and partly because it seemed necessary to make the Dictionary complete.
deprived of sight, yet pretended to shew the way to others.*

In taking a view of the corruptions, both in doctrine and practice, which prevailed among the Jews at the time of Christ's appearance, we find that the external worship of God was disfigured by human inventions. Many learned men have observed that a great variety of rites were introduced into the service of the temple, of which no traces are to be found in the sacred writings. This was owing to those revolutions which rendered the Jews more conversant than they had formerly been with the neighbouring nations. They were pleased with several of the ceremonies which the Greeks and Romans used in the worship of the pagan deities, and did not hesitate to adopt them in the service of the true God, and add them as an ornament to the rites which they had received by divine appointment.

The Jews multiplied so prodigiously, that the narrow bounds of Palestine were no longer sufficient to contain them. They poured, therefore, their increasing numbers into the neighbouring countries with much rapidity, that at the time of Christ's birth there was scarcely a province in the empire where they were not found carrying on commerce, and exercising other lucrative arts. They were defended in foreign countries against injurious treatment by the special edicts of the magistrates. This was absolutely necessary, since in most places the remarkable difference of their religion and manners from those of other nations, exposed them to the hatred and indignation of the ignorant and bigoted multitude. "All this (says doctor Mosheim) appears to have been most singularly and wisely directed by the adorable hand of an interposing providence, to the end that this people, which was the sole depository of the true religion, and of the knowledge of one supreme God, being spread abroad through the whole earth, might be everywhere, by their example, a reproach to superstition, contribute in some measure to check it; and thus prepare the way for that yet fuller discovery of divine truth which was to shine upon the world from the ministry and gospel of the Son of God."†

SECTION III.

At the important era of Christ's appearance in the world, two kinds of philosophy prevailed among the civilized nations. One was the philosophy of the Greeks, adopted also by the Romans; and the other that of the Orientals, which had a great number of votaries in Persia, Syria, Chaldea, Egypt, and even among the Jews. The former was distinguished by the simple title of philosophy; the latter was honoured by the more pompous appellation of science or knowledge, since those who adhered to the latter sect pretended to be the restorers of the knowledge of God which was lost in the world. The followers of both these systems, in consequence of vehement disputes and dissensions about several points, subdivided themselves into a variety of sects. It is however to be observed, that all the sects of the oriental philosophy deduced their various tenets from one fundamental principle which they held in common; but the Greeks were much divided about the first principles of science.

Amongst the Grecian sects there were some who declaimed openly against religion, and denied the immortality of the soul; and others who acknowledged a Deity, and a state of future rewards and punishments. Of the former kind were the Epicureans and Academicians, of the latter the Platonists and Stoics; for whose peculiarities we again refer our readers to their respective denominations in the dictionary.

The oriental philosophy was popular in several nations at the time of Christ's appearance. Before the commencement of the Christian era it was taught in the east, whence it gradually spread through the Alexandrian, Jewish, and Christian schools.

Those who professed to believe the oriental philosophy were divided into three leading sects, which were subdivided into others. Some imagined two eternal principles, from whence all things proceeded; the one presiding over light, the other over matter, and by their perpetual conflict explaining the mixture of good and evil that appears in the universe. Others maintained that the being which pre-
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sided over matter was not an eternal principle, but a subordinate intelligence; one of those which the supreme God produced from himself. They supposed that this being was moved by a sudden impulse to reduce to order the rude mass of matter which lay excluded from the mansions of the Deity, and also to create the human race. A third sect entertained the idea of a triumvirate of beings, in which the supreme Deity was distinguished both from the material evil principle, and from the Creator of this sublunary world.—That these divisions did really subsist, is evident from the history of the Christian sects which embraced this philosophy.

From blending the doctrines of the oriental philosophy with Christianity, the Gnostic sects, which were so numerous in the first centuries, derive their origin. Other denominations arose which aimed to unite Judaism with Christianity. Many of the pagan philosophers who were converted to the Christian religion, exerted all their art and ingenuity to accommodate the doctrines of the gospel to their own schemes of philosophy. In each age of the church new systems were introduced, till, in process of time, we find the Christian world divided into that prodigious variety of sentiment which is exhibited in the following pages.

Postscript, by the present Editor.

Before the Reader proceeds it may be proper to suggest a hint with regard to the medium through which the following accounts have been derived. Those of the ancient sects have necessarily been taken from early Ecclesiastical History, which was by no means written with the candour and impartiality of modern times. It was considered as no sin to blacken the character of a Heretic, and to differ from the high ecclesiastical authorities, was reckoned a sufficient proof of heresy. After the rise of Popery, this was more eminently the case; and as the Roman Pontiff was regarded as the centre of truth, and the supreme judge in all controversies, to differ from him, was of course to err; and indeed, on any article of faith, to err fatally.

* Mosheim, vol. 1, pp. 70, 71.
Another circumstance, worthy to be remembered is, that as the church increased in splendour and authority, it degenerated in purity, and in attachment to the holiness of the gospel. When therefore any Divine, or Society of christians, remonstrated against the corruptions of the church, some nick-name was immediately given, to exhibit them to the world as heretical or fanatical. This was particularly the case at the time of the Reformation, when every congregation of dissenters from popery was branded by some odious name, to hold them up to ridicule. Modern writers have endeavoured to ascertain the true sentiments of these sects, and great caution has been employed in the following work to guard against misrepresentation, though perhaps, not always with complete success.

As to modern sects, it has been the practice in this candid age to let them speak for themselves, and this liberal principle was adopted in the last edition of this work, by which means some articles were carried to a disproportionate length; in this edition it has been found necessary to abridge them, in order to introduce a considerable number of denominations hitherto omitted. The present editor has endeavoured to hold an equal balance; allowing to every article room in proportion to its importance, and delineating the opinions of every sect he has introduced with fidelity and candour. Truth, indeed, has been his principle aim; and truth, sacred truth, is the great object of enquiry he would recommend to others, and in the pursuit of which he is happy in being able to offer so excellent a Guide as may be found in the valuable Essay of Mr. Fuller, which precedes this Introduction.