

The Province, Study and Advantage of Ecclesiastical History



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The Province, Study and Advantage of Ecclesiastical History

Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church

Arthur Stanley



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INTRODUCTION

I

THE PROVINCE OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

WHEN Christian the Pilgrim, in his progress towards the Celestial City, halted by the highway side at the Palace of which the name was Beautiful, he was told, that "he should not depart till they had shown him the rarities of that place. And first they had him into the study, where they showed him records of the greatest antiquity : " in which was "the pedigree of the Lord of the hill, the Son of the Ancient of Days. . . . Here also were more fully recorded the acts that he had done, and the names of many hundreds that he had taken into his service ; and how he had placed them in such habitations, that could neither by length of days nor decays of nature be dissolved. Then they read to him some of the worthy acts that some of his servants had done ; as how they had subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, and turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Then they read again in another part of the records of the house, how willing their Lord was to receive in his favour any, even any, though they in time past had offered great affronts to his person and proceedings. Here also were several other histories of other famous things, of all which Christian had a view ; as of things both ancient and modern, together with prophecies and predictions of things that have their certain accomplishment, both to the dread and amazement of enemies, and the comfort and solace of pilgrims."

These simple sentences from the familiar story of our childhood, contain a true description of the subjects, method, and advantages of the study of Ecclesiastical History, which I now propose to unfold in preparation for the duties which I have been called to discharge. And with this object, it will be my endeavour in this opening Lecture to reduce to order the treasures which were shown to solace and cheer the Pilgrim

on his way, by defining the limits of the province on which we are about to enter.

I. First, then, where does Ecclesiastical History commence? Shall we begin with the Reformation—with the framework of religion with which we ourselves are specially concerned? Or with the new birth of Christendom, properly so called, in the foundation of modern Europe? Or with the close of the first century—with the age of those to whom we accord the name of our “Fathers” in the Christian faith? In a certain sense, each of these periods may be taken, and by different classes of men always will be taken, respectively, as the boundaries of the history of the Church. But, if we are fixing, not merely the accidental limits of convenience, but the true limits involved in the nature of the subject; if Ecclesiastical History means the History of the Church of God; if that history is one united whole; if it cannot be understood without embracing within its range the history of the events, of the persons, of the ideas which have had the most lasting, the most powerful effect on every stage of its course; we must ascend far higher in the stream of time than the sixteenth, or the fifth, or the second century,—beyond the Reformers, beyond the Popes, beyond the Fathers.

. . . . Far in the dim distance of primeval ages, is discerned the first figure in the long succession which has never since been broken,—in Ur of the Chaldees, the Patriarchal chief, followed by his train of slaves and retainers, surrounded by his herds of camels and asses, moving westward and southward, he knew not whither,—the first Father of the universal Church,—Abraham, the founder of the Chosen People, the Father of the Faithful, whose seed was to be as the sand upon the sea-shore, as the stars for multitude.

Earlier manifestations doubtless there had been of faith and hope; in other countries also than Mesopotamia or Palestine there were yearnings after a higher world. But the call of Abraham is the first beginning of a continuous growth; in his character, in his migration, in his faith was bound up, as the Christian Apostle well describes, all that has since formed the substance and fibre of the history of the Church.

From this point, then, we start, and from this shall be prepared to enter on the history of the people of Israel, as the true beginning and prototype of the Christian Church. So in old times it was ever held; to the Apostolic age it could not be otherwise; even Eusebius, writing for a special purpose, is