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978-1-108-00416-9 - More Worlds Than One: The Creed of the Philosopher and the Hope of the Christian

David Brewster

Excerpt

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# MORE WORLDS THAN ONE.

## INTRODUCTION.

THERE is no subject within the whole range of knowledge so universally interesting as that of a Plurality of Worlds. It commands the sympathies, and appeals to the judgment of men of all nations, of all creeds, and of all times ; and no sooner do we comprehend the few simple facts on which it rests, than the mind rushes instinctively to embrace it. Before the great truths of Astronomy were demonstrated—before the dimensions and motions of the planets were ascertained, and the fixed stars placed at inconceivable distances from the system to which we belong, philosophers and poets descried in the celestial spheres the abodes of the blest ; but it was not till the form and size and motions of

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the earth were known, and till the condition of the other planets was found to be the same, that analogy compelled us to believe that these planets must be inhabited like our own.

Although this opinion was maintained incidentally by various writers both on astronomy and natural religion, yet M. Fontenelle, Secretary to the Academy of Sciences in Paris, was the first individual who wrote a work expressly on the subject. It was published in 1686, the year before Sir Isaac Newton gave his immortal work, the *Principia*, to the world. It was entitled *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, and consisted of five chapters with the following titles.

1. The Earth is a planet which turns round its own axis and also round the sun.
2. The Moon is a habitable world.
3. Particulars concerning the world in the Moon, and that the other planets are also inhabited.
4. Particulars of the worlds of Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.
5. The Fixed Stars are as many Suns, each of which illuminates a world.

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In another edition of the work published in 1719, Fontenelle added a sixth chapter, entitled,

6. New thoughts which confirm those in the preceding conversations. The latest discoveries which have been made in the heavens.

This singular work, written by a man of great genius, and with a sufficient knowledge of astronomy, excited a high degree of interest, both from the nature of the subject and the vivacity and humour with which it is written. The conversations are carried on with the Marchioness of G——, with whom the author is supposed to be residing. The lady is, of course, distinguished by youth, beauty, and talent, and the share which she takes in the dialogue is not less interesting than the more scientific part assumed by the philosopher.

The *Plurality of Worlds*, as the work was called, was read with unexampled avidity, and was speedily circulated through every part of Europe. It was translated into all the languages of the Continent, and was honoured by annotations from the pen of the celebrated astronomer La Lande, and of M. Gottsched, one of its German editors. No fewer than *three* English

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translations of it were published, and one of these, we believe the first, had run through *six* editions so early as the year 1737. Wherever it was read it was admired, and though *one hundred and sixty-seven years* have elapsed since its publication, we have not been able to learn that any attempt has been made, during that long period, either to ridicule or controvert the fascinating doctrines which it taught.

A few years after the publication of Fontenelle's work, the celebrated philosopher Christian Huygens, the contemporary of Newton, and the discoverer of the ring and the satellites of Saturn, composed a work on the Plurality of Worlds, under the title of the *Theory of the Universe, or Conjectures concerning the Celestial Bodies and their Inhabitants*.<sup>1</sup> This interesting treatise, as large as that of Fontenelle, has never been translated into English. It was written at the age of sixty-seven, a short time before the author's death, and so great was the interest which he felt in its publication, that he earnestly besought his brother to carry his wishes into effect. He

<sup>1</sup> *Cosmotheoros sive de Terris Celestibus, earumque ornatu conjecturæ, ad Constantinum Hugenum Fratrem, Gulielmo iii. Magnæ Britanniæ Regi a Secretis. Hugonii Opera, tom. ii. pp. 645-722.*

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mentions the great pleasure he had derived from the composition of it, and from the communication of his views to his friends. About to enter the world of the future, the philosopher who had added new planets to our system, and discovered the most magnificent and incomprehensible of its bodies, looked forward with interest to a solution of the mysteries which it had been the business and the happiness of his life to contemplate. He was anxious that his fellow-men should derive the same pleasure from viewing the planets as the seat of intellectual life, and he left them his Theory of the Universe—a legacy worthy of his name.

The *Cosmotheoros* is a work essentially different from that of Fontenelle. It is didactic and dispassionate, deducing by analogical reasoning a variety of views respecting the plants and animals in the planets, and the general nature and condition of their inhabitants. The work is to some extent a popular Treatise on Astronomy, and contains all that was at that time known respecting the primary and secondary planets of the solar system.

We are not acquainted with any other work

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written expressly on the subject of a Plurality of Worlds, but the doctrine was maintained by almost all the distinguished astronomers and writers who have flourished since the true figure of the earth was determined. Giordano Bruno of Nola,<sup>1</sup> Kepler and Tycho believed in it; and Cardinal Cusa and Bruno, before the discovery of binary systems among the stars, believed also that the stars were inhabited. In more modern times Dr. Bentley, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, in his eighth sermon on the Confutation of Atheism from the origin and frame of the world,<sup>2</sup> has maintained the same doctrine, and in our own day we may number among its supporters the distinguished names of Sir William and Sir John Herschel, Dr. Chalmers, Isaac Taylor, and M. Arago.

Under these circumstances the scientific world has been greatly surprised at the appearance of a work entitled *Of the Plurality of Worlds*, the object of which is to prove that our earth is the only inhabited world in the universe, while its direct tendency is to ridicule and bring into

<sup>1</sup> In his work entitled *Univerſo e Mondi innumerabili*.

<sup>2</sup> This sermon was written from the information given him by Sir Isaac Newton in his four celebrated letters addressed to Dr. Bentley.

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contempt the grand discoveries in sidereal astronomy by which the last century has been distinguished. Although it is not probable that a work of this kind, however ably it is written, and however ingenious may be the reasoning by which views so novel and extraordinary are defended, will influence opinions long and deeply cherished, we have thought it necessary, in defence of astronomical truth, as well as of the lessons which it teaches, to defend the doctrine of a Plurality of Worlds by the aid of modern discoveries, and to analyze and refute the objections which have been made to it in the very remarkable work to which we have referred.

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## CHAPTER I.

## RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF THE QUESTION.

BEFORE Christianity shed its light upon the world, the philosopher who had no other guide but reason, looked beyond the grave for a resting-place from his labours, as well as for a solution of the mysteries which perplexed him. Minds, too, of an inferior order, destined for immortality, and conscious of their destination, instinctively pried into the future, cherishing visions of another world with all the interests of domestic affection, and with all the curiosity which the study of nature inspires. Interesting as has been the past history of our race,—engrossing as must ever be the present,—the future, more exciting still, mingles itself with every thought and sentiment, and casts its beams of hope, or its shadows of fear, over the stage both of active and contemplative life. In

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youth we scarcely descry it in the distance. To the stripling and the man it appears and disappears like a variable star, shewing in painful succession its spots of light and of shade. In age it looms gigantic to the eye, full of chastened hope and glorious anticipation ; and at the great transition when the outward eye is dim, the image of the future is the last picture which is effaced from the retina of the mind.

But however universal has been the anticipation of the future, and however powerful its influence over the mind, Reason did not venture to give a form and locality to its conceptions ; and the imagination, even with its loosest reins, failed in the attempt. Before the birth of Astronomy, indeed, when our knowledge of space terminated with the ocean or the mountain range that bounded our view, the philosopher could but place his elysium in the sky ; and even when revelation had unveiled the house of many mansions, the Christian sage could but place his future home in the new heavens and in the new earth of his creed. Thus vaguely shadowed forth, thus seen as through a glass darkly, the future even of the Christian, though a reality

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to his faith, was but a dream to his reason; and in vain did he inquire what this future was to be in its physical relations,—in what region of space it was to be spent,—what duties and pursuits were to occupy it,—and what intellectual and spiritual gifts were to be its portion. But when Science taught us the past history of our earth, its form, and size, and motions,—when Astronomy surveyed the solar system, and measured its planets, and pronounced the earth to be but a tiny sphere, and to have no place of distinction among its gigantic compeers,—and when the Telescope established new systems of worlds far beyond the boundaries of our own, the future of the sage claimed a place throughout the universe, and inspired him with an interest in worlds, and systems of worlds,—in life without limits, as well as in life without end. On eagles' wings he soared to the zenith, and sped his way to the horizon of space, without reaching its ever-retiring bourne; and in the infinity of worlds, and amid the infinity of life, he descried the home and the companions of the future.

That these views are in accordance with the