The national records were not allowed to he written by any man who might think himself fit for the of­fice; and if a prieſt falſified them, he was excluded from the altar and depoſed from his office. Thus we are aſſured, the Jewiſh records were committed to the charge of the prieſts; and as they may be conſidered as the same family from Aaron to the Babyloniſh captivity and downwards, the ſame credit is due to them that would be due to family records, which by antiquarians are eſteemed the moſt authentic ſources of information.

Of the 22 books which Joſephus reckoned himſelf bound to believe, the hiſtorical books from the death of Moſes to the reign of Artaxerxes, he informs us, were written by contemporary prophets. It appears, then, that the prophets were the compoſers, and the prieſts the hereditary keepers, of the national records. Thus, the beſt proviſion poſſible was made that they ſhould be written accurately, and be preſerved uncorrupted. The principal office of theſe prophets was to inſtruct the people in their duty to God, and occaſionally to com­municate the predictions of future events. For this ρurpoſe they were educated in the ſchools of the pro­phets, or in academies where ſacred learning was taught. The prophets were therefore the learned men of their time, and conſequently were beſt qualified for the office of hiſtorians. It may be objected, that the prophets, in concert with the prieſts, might have forged any writings they pleaſed. But before we ſuſpect that they have done ſo in the hiſtorical books of the Old Teſtament, we muſt find out ſome motive which could induce them to commit ſo daring a crime. But this is impoſſible. No encomiums are made either upon the prophets or the prieſts; no adulation to the reign­ing monarch appears, nor is the favour of the populace courted. The faults of all ranks are delineated with­out referve. Indeed there is no hiſtory extant that has more the appearance of impartiality. We are preſented with a ſimple detail of facts, and are left to diſcover the motives and intentions of the ſeveral characters; and when a character is drawn, it is done in a few words, without exaggerating the vices or amplifying the virtues.

It is of no real conſequence, therefore, whether we can aſcertain the authors of the different books or not. From Joſephus we know that they exiſted in his time; and from his account of the manner in which they were preſerved we are aſſured they were not in danger of being corrupted. They exiſted alſo when the Septua- gint tranſlation was made. Frequent references are made to them in the writings of the later prophets; ſometimes the ſame facts are related in detail. In ſhort, there is ſuch a coincidence between the hiſtorical books and the writings of thoſe prophets who were contempo­rary, that it is impoſſible to ſuppoſe the latter true without receiving the former.

Indeed, to ſuppoſe that the Jews could have recei­ved and preſerved with ſuch care for ſo many hundred years falſe records, which it muſt have been in the pow­er of every perſon to diſprove, and which at the ſame time do ſo little credit to the character of their nation,

is to ſuppoſe one of the greateſt abſurdities in the world: it is to ſuppoſe that a whole nation could act contrary to all thoſe principles which have always pre­dominated in the human mind, and which muſt always predominate till human nature undergo a total revolu­tion.

The book which immediately follows the Penta­teuch has been generally aſcribed to Joſhua the ſucceſſor of Moſes. It contains, however, ſome things which muſt have been inſerted after the death of Jo­ſhua. It is neceſſary to remark, that there is ſome ac­cidental derangement in the order of the chapters of this book, which was probably occaſioned by the an­cient mode of fixing together a number of rolls. If chronologically placed, they ſhould be read thus, 1ſt chapter to the 10th verſe, then the 2d chapter; then from the 10th verſe to the end of the 1ſt chapter; af­terwards ſhould follow the vi. vii. viii. ix x. and xi. chapters; then the xxii.; and laſtly the xii. and xiii. chapters to the 24th verſe of the latter.

The facts mentioned in this book are referred to by many of the ſacred writers @@§. In the book of Kings XVI. 34. the words of Joſhua are ſaid to be the words of God. See Joshua.

By whom the book of Judges was written is uncer­tain; but as it contains the hiſtory of the Jewiſh repub­lic for 317 years, the materials muſt have been furniſhed by different perſons. The book, however, ſeems to be the compoſition of one individual @@(G), who lived af­ter the regal government was eltabliſhed@@‡, but before the acceſſion of David: for it is ſaid in the 21ſt verſe of the 1ſt chapter, that the Jeſuſites were ſtill in Jeruſalem; who, we know, were diſpoſſeſſed of that city ear­ly in the reign of David@@⁋. We have reaſon, therefore, to aſcribe this book to Samuel.

The hiſtory of this book may be divided into two parts; the firſt contains an account of the Judges from Othniel to Samſon, ending at the 16th chap. The ſecond part relates ſeveral remarkable tranſactions which occurred ſoon after the death of Joſhua; but are thrown to the end of the book, that they might not interrupt the courſe of the hiſtory. See Judges.

The book of Ruth is a kind of ſupplement to the book of Judges, and an introduction to the hiſtory of David, as it is related in the books of Samuel. Since the genealogy which it contains deſcends to David, it muſt have been written after the birth of that prince, but not at any conſiderable time after it; for the hi­ſtory of Boaz and Ruth, the great-grandfather and great-grandmother of David, could not be remembered above two or three generations. As the elder brothers of David and their sons are omitted, and none of his own children are mentioned in the genealogy, it is evi­dent that the book was compoſed in honour of the He­brew monarch, after he was anointed king by Samuel, and before any of his children were born; and conſe­quently in the reign of Saul. The Jews aſcribe it to Samuel; and indeed there is no perſon of that age to whom it may be attributed with more propriety. We are informed (1 Sam. x. 25.) that Samuel was a writer,

@@[m]§ I Chron. ii. 7-xii. 15.; Psalm cxiv 3.; Isa. xxviii. 21.; Acts vii. 45.; Heb. xi. 31.- xiii. 5. James ii. 25. 28.; Ecclus. xliv. 4.; I. Mac, ii. 5. 6.

@@[m]‡ Jud. xix. I. xxi. 25.

@@[m]⁋ 2. Sam. v. 6. 8.

@@@(g) In ſupport of this opinion, it may be obſerved, that the author, chap. ii. 10, &c. lays before us the con­tents of the book.