

CHAPTER 3

In the old time men worshiped false gods, as they do still in heathendom today. Atheism is the recoil from Christianity rejected. But the unbelief of earnest men who are willing to believe, but cannot, is not to be confounded with the blind and bitter atheism of apostates.

Nor will it avail to plead that the miracles by which Christianity was accredited at first still live as evidence of its truth. That will not satisfy the question here at issue, which is not the truth of Christianity but the fact of a silent Heaven. That in presence of the measureless ocean of human suffering in the great world around us, and in spite of the articulate cry so constantly wrung from the hearts of His faithful people, God should preserve a silence which is absolute and crushing--this is a mystery which Christianity seems only to render more inscrutable.

Here, however, we are assuming that miracles are possible, and thus we shall incur the contempt of all persons of superior enlightenment. But we can brook their sneers. Nor will they betray us into the folly of turning aside to enter upon the great miracle controversy, save insofar as the subject in hand requires it. Open infidelity has made no advance upon the arguments of Hume. Indeed the phenomenal triumphs of modern science have only served to weaken the infidel's position, for they have discredited the theory that new discoveries in nature might yet account for the miracles of Scripture. The only thing distinctive about the infidelity of our own times is that it has assumed the dress and language of religion. Among its teachers are "Doctors of Divinity" and Professors in Christian universities and colleges. And as the disciples and admirers of these men claim for them superior intelligence and special vigor of mental perception, an examination of these pretensions may not be inopportune. But vivisection is to be deprecated, and mere abstract statements carry little weight. How, then, are we to proceed? An Oxford Professor of the past generation will do as the *corpus vile* for the inquiry. Let us turn to the treatise upon "The Evidences of Christianity" in the notorious "Essays and Reviews." Its thesis may be stated in a single sentence--That the reign of law is absolute and universal. From this it follows of course (1) that a miracle is an impossibility, and (2) that Holy Scripture is altogether unreliable. Inspiration, therefore, is out of the question, save as all goodness and genius are inspired.

It may seem feeble to turn back now to the "Essays and Reviews," but the last forty years have made no change in the German Rationalism which that epoch-making book first brought to the notice of the average Englishman. These views are being taught today in many of our schools of theology. The future occupants of so-called Christian pulpits are being taught that the miraculous in Scripture must be rejected, and that the Bible must be read like any other book.

Now what concerns us here is not whether this teaching is true; let us assume its truth. Nor yet whether the teachers be honest; we assume their integrity. But what can be said for their intelligence? Any dullard can trade upon the labors of others. The most commonplace of men can understand and adopt the tenets of the rationalists. Where

mental power will declare itself is in the capacity to review preconceived ideas in the light of the new tenets. Let us apply this test to the Christian rationalists. The incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension of Christ--these are incomparably the greatest of all miracles. If we accept them, the credibility of other miracles resolves itself entirely into a question of evidence. If we reject them, the whole Christian system falls to pieces like a house of cards. To change the figure, when Christianity is exposed to the clear light and air of "modern thought," what seemed to be a living body crumbles into dust. Yet these men profess unfaltering faith in Christianity. But while their faith does credit to their hearts, it proves the weakness of their heads. Those who believe in the Divinity of Christ while rejecting inspiration and miracles may pose as persons of superior enlightenment--in fact, they are credulous creatures who would believe anything. Such faith as theirs is the merest superstition. Appeal might here be made to unnumbered witnesses among the scholars and thinkers of our time, who in face of this dilemma have found themselves compelled to choose "between a deeper faith and a bolder unbelief."

If Christ was indeed Divine, no person of ordinary intelligence will question that He had power to open the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the lips of the dumb. If He had power to forgive sins, it is a small matter to believe that He had power to heal diseases. If He could give *Eternal Life*, there is nothing to wonder at in the record that He could restore natural life. And if He is now upon the throne of God and all power in heaven and earth is His, every man of common sense will brush aside all sophistries and quibbles about causation and natural laws, and will recognize that our Divine Lord could do for men today all He did for them in the days of His ministry on earth.]

But how is it that He does not? I know that if in the days of His humiliation this poor crippled child had been brought into His presence, He would have healed it. And I am assured that His power is greater now than when He sojourned upon earth, and that He is still as near to us as He then was. But when I bring this to a practical test, it fails. Whatever the reason, it does not *seem* true. This poor afflicted child must remain a cripple. I dare not say He *cannot* heal my child, but it is clear He *will* not. And why will He not? How is this mystery to be explained? The plain fact is that with all who believe the Bible, the great difficulty respecting miracles is not their occurrence but their absence.

In his "Foundations of Belief," Mr. Balfour reproduces the suggestion that if the special circumstances in which a miracle was wrought were again to recur, the miracle would recur also. But even if the truth of this could be ascertained, it would have no bearing on the present problem. Miracles, Mr. Balfour avers, are "wonders due to the special action of Divine power." As then we have to do neither with a mere machine nor with a monster, but with a personal God who is infinite in wisdom and power and love, how is it that in a world which, *pace* [with all do respect to] the philosopher, cries aloud for that "special action," we look for it in vain?

In his "Studies Subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler," Mr. Gladstone speaks in the same sense, but still more definitely. In his discussion of Hume's dictum, that miracles are impossible because they imply the violation of natural laws, he says: "Now, unless we know all the laws of nature, Hume's contention is of no avail; for the alleged miracle may

come under some law not yet known to us." But surely this admission is fatal. The evidential value of miracles, against which Hume is arguing, depends on the assumption that they are due, as Mr. Balfour says, to "the *special* action of Divine power," and that but for such action they would not have occurred. That is to say, it is essential that the act or event represented as miraculous should be *supernatural*. If, therefore, the "alleged" miracle can be brought within the sphere of the *natural*, it is thereby shown not to be a *real* miracle. In other words, it is not a miracle at all.

If a miracle were indeed a violation of the laws of nature, not a few of us who believe in miracles would renounce our faith. For then the word "impossible" would be transferred to the sphere in which it is rightly predicated of acts attributable to the Almighty. "It is," we declare, "impossible for God to lie": it is equally impossible for Him to violate His own laws; He "*cannot deny Himself*." But this vaunted dictum owes its seeming force solely to confounding what is *above* nature with what is *against* nature. Beyond this it is nothing but a cloak for ignorance.

Here is a stone upon the road. In obedience to unchanging law, it lies there inert and tends to sink into the ground. Were it to rise from the earth and fly upward toward the sky, it would, you say, be indeed a miracle. But this you know is absolutely impossible. Impossible! A rude boy who comes along snatches it from us and flings it into the air. This mischievous urchin has thus achieved what you declared to be impossible! "But," you exclaim, "this is mere trifling, we *saw* the boy throw it up!" Is it by our senses, then, that the limits of possibility are to be fixed? This is materialism with a vengeance! Suppose the boy himself should fall over a precipice, and you grasped him and drew him up again to safety. Would this be a violation of the law of gravitation? Why, then, should it be such if his rescue were achieved by some unseen hand? A miracle it would be, no doubt, but not "a violation of the laws of nature." As Dean Mansel expresses it, a miracle is merely "the introduction of a new agent, possessing new powers, and therefore not included under the rules generalized from a previous experience."

But some thoughtless person may still object that matter can be put in motion only by matter, and that to talk of a stone being raised by an unseen hand is therefore absurd. Indeed! Will the objector tell us how it is he puts his own body in motion? The power of something, that is not matter, over matter is one of the commonest facts of life. The Apostle Peter walked upon the sea. "Nonsense!" the infidel exclaims, with a toss of his head. "That would be a violation of natural laws." And yet the phenomenon may have been as simple as that produced when he himself shakes his head! It is possible, moreover, that the laws may yet be explained under which the miracles were performed.¹ Nor would they cease to be miracles if those laws were known; for the test of a miracle is not that it should be inexplicable, but that it should be beyond human power to accomplish

1 This possibly may be what Mr. Gladstone means in the statement criticized above on pg. 2. But if so, I am at a loss to understand either his language or his argument. He seems to suggest that the "alleged" miracles may yet be explained to us, just as the predicted eclipse of the moon which terrified the South Sea Islanders might afterwards have been explained to the savages. An illustration may make my own meaning plain. That fire should come down from the sky and kindle a pile of wood is a commonplace phenomenon. It might occur during any thunderstorm. But if I heap wood together upon a certain spot, and at my word lightning falls upon it and consumes it, this is a miracle; and the element of the miraculous is in the fact that I have set in motion some power that is above nature and competent to control it.

it. Whether or not the power in exercise be Divine, is matter of evidence or inference; but once the presence of Divine power is ascertained, a miracle, regarded as a *fact*, is accounted for.

If a surgeon restores sight to a blind man, or a physician rescues a fever patient from death, the fact excites no other emotion than our gratitude. But when we are told that such cures have been achieved by Divine power without the use of medicine or the knife, we are called upon to refuse even to examine the evidence. The plain fact is that men do not believe in "Divine power," or the "unseen hand." Disguise it as we will, this is the real point of the controversy. In the case of every *human* being, "special action" is a duty if thereby he can relieve suffering or avert disaster; but in the case of the Divine Being, it is not to be expected or indeed tolerated! It is accepted as an axiom that Almighty God must be a cipher in His own world!

The doctrinaire infidel rejects Christianity on the ground that the only evidence of its truth is the miracles by which it was accredited at the first, and that miracles are impossible--propositions, both of which are untenable. The ordinary infidel, on the other hand, bringing practical intelligence and common sense to bear upon the question, rejects Christianity because, he argues, if the Christian's God were not a myth, He would not remain passive in presence of all the suffering and wrong which prevail in the world. That is to say, discarding the contention of the doctrinaire philosopher that miracles are impossible, he maintains that if there really existed a Supreme Being of infinite goodness and power, miracles would abound. And the vast majority of infidels belong to this second category. But though the philosophers are few, and their sophistries have failed to take hold of the minds of common men, they have well-nigh monopolized the attention of Christian apologists. Common men, moreover, unlike the philosophers, are apt to be both fair and earnest, and ready to consider any reasonable explanation of their difficulties. But the answer offered them is for the most part either futile or inadequate.

Mr. Gladstone, for instance, falls back upon the plea that "if the experience of miracles were universal, they would cease to be miracles." But what possible ground is there for this? They would cease to excite wonder, no doubt; but that is no test of the miraculous. In the beginning of our Lord's ministry, and before the antipathy of the religious leaders of the Jews took shape in plots for His destruction, His miracles of healing were so numerous and so free to all that they must have come to be regarded as matters of course. He "went about," we read, "in *all* Galilee, healing *all* manner of disease and *all* manner of sickness among the people. And the report of Him went forth into *all* Syria, and they brought unto Him *all* that were sick, holden with divers diseases and torments, possessed with devils, and epileptic, and palsied; and He healed them" (Matt. 4:23,24, R.V.). In presence of such an unlimited display of miraculous power, all sense of wonder must have soon died out. But yet every fresh cure was a fresh miracle, and would have been recognized as such.

And so would it be in our own day, if, for example, whenever a wicked man committed an outrage upon his neighbor, Divine power intervened to strike down the offender and protect his victim. The event would cease to excite the least surprise; but all would none the less recognize the hand of God and own His justice and goodness. And there would be

no infidels left--except, of course, the philosophers!

The difficulty therefore remains unsolved. The true explanation of it will be considered in the sequel; but at this stage the discussion of it is a mere digression. So far as the present argument is concerned, the matter may be summed up in borrowed words:

"The Scripture miracles stand on a solid basis which no *reasoning* can overthrow. Their *possibility* cannot be denied without denying the very nature of God as an all-powerful Being; their *probability* cannot be questioned without questioning His *moral* perfections; and their certainty as matters of fact can only be invalidated by destroying the very foundations of all human testimony."²

2 Bishop Van Mildert's "Boyle Lectures," sermon xxi. Of the truth of these last words, Hume's celebrated treatise supplies most striking proof. He takes exception to the evidence for the Christian miracles; but when he goes on to speak of certain miracles alleged to have occurred in France upon the tomb of Abbé Paris, the famous Jansenist, he admits that the evidence in support of them was clear, complete, and without a flaw. But yet he rejects them, and that solely because of "the absolute impossibility, or miraculous nature of the events"! It behooves us to regard such evidence with suspicion; but to accept the evidence and yet to reject the facts thus established, is indeed "to destroy the very foundations of all human testimony."