

CHAPTER 4

That Paley and those who follow him have mistaken and misstated the evidential value of the miracles of Christ may seem to some a startling proposition; but it is by no means a novel one. To this error, moreover, it is that the argument against miracles in John Stuart Mill's "Essays on Religion" owes its seeming cogency.

The unbelief of the Christianized skeptic compares unfavorably with the agnosticism of the honest infidel. The one in rejecting miracles destroys the authenticity of the Gospels, and thus recklessly undermines the foundations of Christianity. The object of the other is a defense of human reason against supposed encroachments upon its authority. The one trades in sophistries which have been again and again refuted and exposed. The other propounds arguments which have never yet been adequately answered. The pseudo-Christian practically joins hands with the atheist; for no amount of special pleading will avail to silence Paley's challenge, "Once believe there is a God, and miracles are not incredible." The avowed agnostic seizes upon Paley's gratuitous assertion that a revelation can only be made by miracles, and he sets himself to prove that miracles are wholly invalid for such a purpose.

Among English men of letters, Mill's position is almost unique. From the account of his childhood in that saddest of books, his "Autobiography," it would appear that he approached the study of Christianity from the standpoint of a cultured pagan. He was wholly unconscious, therefore, that his argument against the theologian's position was entirely in accord with the teaching of Scripture. "A revelation cannot be proved Divine unless by external evidence": such is his mode of restating Paley's thesis. And the problem this involves may be explained by the following illustration.

A stranger appears, say in London, the metropolis of the world, claiming to be the bearer of a Divine revelation to mankind, and in order to accredit his message he proceeds to display miraculous power. Let us assume for the moment that after the strictest inquiry the reality of the miracles is established, and that all are agreed as to their genuineness. Here, then, we are face to face with the question in the most practical way. If the "Christian argument" be sound, we are bound to accept whatever gospel this prophet proclaims. And no one who knows anything of human nature will doubt that it would be generally received. The Christian, however, would be kept back by the words of the inspired apostle: "But though we *or an angel from heaven* should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema" (Gal. 1:8, R.V.). In a word, the Christian would at once give up his "Paley" and fall back upon the position of the skeptic in the "Essays on Religion"! He would insist, moreover, on bringing the new miracle-accredited gospel to the test of Holy Writ, and finding it inconsistent with the gospel he had already received, he would reject it. That is to say, he would test the message not by the miracles, but by a preceding revelation known to be Divine.

That Christ came to found a new religion, and that Christianity was received in the world on the authority of miracles--these are theses which command almost universal acceptance in Christendom. It may seem startling to maintain that both are alike

erroneous, and that the Christian position has been seriously prejudiced by the error. And yet this is the conclusion which the preceding argument suggests, and to which full and careful inquiry will lead us. Is it not a fact that those in whose midst the miracles of Christ were wrought were the very people who crucified Him as a profane impostor? Is it not a fact that when challenged to work miracles in support of His Messianic claims He peremptorily refused? (Matt. 12:38,39; 16:1-4.)

"However," says Bishop Butler in summing up his argument on this subject, "the fact is allowed that Christianity was professed to be received into the world upon the belief of miracles," and "that is what the first converts would have alleged as their reason for embracing it." Language cannot be plainer. The "first converts," having witnessed the miracles, reasoned out the matter and concluded that he who wrought them must be sent of God; and thus became converts. But where is the authority for such a statement? As a matter of fact, not one of the disciples is reported to have attributed his faith to that ground.¹ The narrative of the first Passover of the ministry, which may seem at first sight to refute this, is in fact the clearest proof of it. Here are the words: "Many believed on His name, beholding His signs which He did. But Jesus *did not trust Himself unto them*, for that He knew all men."² That is to say, He refused to recognize any such discipleship.

Then follows the story of Nicodemus, who was one of the number of these miracle-made converts. He had reasoned himself into discipleship, precisely as Butler supposes; but, as Dean Alford expresses it,³ he had to be taught that "it is not learning that is needed for the kingdom, but *life*, and life must begin by birth." Such is throughout the testimony of St. John. Entirely in harmony with it is the testimony of St. Peter, who shared with him the special privilege of witnessing that greatest of the miracles, the Transfiguration on the Holy Mount. "Being born again (he writes), not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, *by the Word of God.*"⁴

Still more striking and significant is the case of St. Paul. As great a reasoner as Butler, and moreover a man of unswerving devotion to what he deemed to be the truth, the completed testimony of the ministry and miracles of Christ left him a bitter opponent and persecutor of Christianity. "I obtained mercy" is his own explanation of the change which took place in him. And again, "It pleased God, who...called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me." Some may call such language mystical. To others, who are themselves what St. Paul till then had been, it may even seem offensive. But whatever its meaning and however regarded, certain it is that it implies something wholly different from what Bishop Butler's words would indicate.⁵

But if the miracles were not intended to be a ground of faith in Christ, why, it will be

1 If any should quote the case of Simon Magus as an exception, they are welcome to their argument!

2 John 2:23,24 (R.V.).

3 Greek Test. Com., John 3.

4 1 Pet. 1:23. Still more definite are the Lord's words addressed to Peter in response to the confession of His Messiahship: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah; for flesh and blood has not revealed it unto you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17).

5 St. Paul's testimony gains in emphasis because of the vision on the Damascus road which, but for his explicit words, might lead us to call him a miracle-made disciple.

asked, were they given at all? They had a twofold character and purpose. Just as a good man who is possessed of the means and the opportunity to relieve suffering is impelled to action by his very nature, so was it with our blessed Lord. When "the Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us," it was, if we may so speak with reverence, a matter of course that sickness and pain and even death should give way before Him. He "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil *because God was with Him.*" The skeptics talk as though our Lord were represented as stopping in His teaching at intervals in order to work some miracle to silence unbelief. The idea is absolutely grotesque in its falseness. On the contrary, we read such statements as this, that "He did not many mighty works because of their unbelief" (Matt. 13:58). As a matter of fact, while there is not recorded a single instance in the whole course of His ministry where faith appealed to Him in vain--and this it is which makes the inexorable reign of law today so strange and overwhelming--neither is there recorded a solitary instance where the challenge of unbelief was rewarded by a miracle. Every challenge of the kind was met by referring the caviller [raiser of trivial objections] to the Scriptures.

And this suggests the second great purpose for which the miracles were given. With the Jew, politics and religion were inseparable. Every hope of spiritual blessing rested on the coming of Messiah. With that advent was connected every promise of national independence and prosperity. The pious few who constituted the little band of His true disciples thought first and most of the spiritual aspect of His mission. The multitude thought only of deliverance from the Roman yoke and the restoration of the bygone glories of their kingdom. In the case of all alike, His chief credentials were to be sought in the Scriptures which foretold His coming, and to these it was that His ultimate appeal was always made. "Ye are searching the Scriptures," He said to the Jews, "and these are they which bear witness of Me, and ye will not come to Me" (John 5:39,40, R.V.). "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

In this respect the evidence of the miracles was purely incidental. It is nowhere suggested that they were given to accredit the teaching; their evidential purpose was solely and altogether to accredit *the Teacher*. It was not merely that they were miracles, but that they were such miracles as the Jews were led by their Scriptures to expect. Their significance depended on their special character,⁶ and their relation to a preceding revelation accepted as Divine by those for whose benefit they were accomplished.

And this suggests, it may be remarked in passing, another flaw in the Christian argument from miracles, as usually stated. What is supernatural is not of necessity Divine. "Every one who works miracles is sent of God: this man works miracles, therefore He is sent of God." The logic of the syllogism is perfect. But the Jew would rightly repudiate the major premise, and of course reject the conclusion. As a matter of fact, he attributed the miracles of Christ to Satan, and our Lord met the taunt not by denying Satanic power, but by appealing to the nature and purpose of His acts. As they were manifestly aimed against the arch-enemy, they could not, He urged, be assigned to his agency.

⁶ Very strikingly is this exemplified in John the Baptist's case (Matt. 11:2-5; see also John 5:36).

The subordination of the testimony of miracles to that of Scripture appears more plainly still in the teaching after the resurrection. "Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." And again, "These are the words which I spoke unto you while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the Psalms concerning Me."⁷ Nor was it otherwise when the apostles took up the testimony. St. Peter's appeal, addressed to the Jews of Jerusalem, was to "all the prophets, from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken" (Acts 3:24). Such also was St. Paul's defense when arraigned before Agrippa: "I continue unto this day witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come" (Acts 26:22). And when we turn to the dogmatic teaching of the Epistles, we have the same truth still more explicitly enforced, that Christ "was a *minister of the circumcision* for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, *as it is written*" (Rom. 15:8,9).

Page after page might thus be filled to prove the falseness of the dictum here under discussion. "A new religion!" It would be nearer the truth to declare that one great purpose of Messiah's advent was to put an end to the reign of religion altogether. Such a statement would be entirely in keeping with the spirit of the only passage in the New Testament where the word occurs in relation to the Christian life (James 1:27). Christ was Himself the reality of every type, the substance of every shadow, the fulfillment of every promise of the old religion. Whether we speak of the altar or the sacrifice, the priest or the temple in which He ministered, Christ was the antitype of all. His purpose was not to set these aside that He might set up others in their place--He came, not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to *fulfill* them. The very details of that elaborate ritual, the very furniture of that gorgeous shrine which was the scene and center of the national worship, all pointed to Him. The ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat which covered it, the most holy place itself, and the veil which shut it in--all were but types of Him. The several altars and the many sacrifices bore witness to His infinite perfections and the varied aspects of His death as bringing glory to God and full redemption to mankind. In plain truth, the attempt to set up a religion now, in the sense in which Judaism was a religion, is to deny Christianity and to apostatize from Christ.⁸

In the light of this truth, the force of the skeptic's argument is wholly dissipated. When the Nazarene appeared, the question with the Jew was not whether, like another John the Baptist, He was "a man sent of God," but whether He was the Sent One, the Messiah to whom all their religion pointed and all their Scriptures bore testimony. "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41). "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write" (John 1:45). Such were the words in which His disciples gave expression to their faith, and by which they sought to draw others to Him. The question,

⁷ Luke 24:27,44. This threefold division of the Old Testament was the one commonly adopted by the Jew--the law, the prophets, and the "Hagiographa." The Psalms stood first in the third division, and thus came to give its name to the whole.

⁸ As regards the use of the word "Religion," see Appendix, Note II.

then, is not whether a revelation can be accredited by external evidence, but whether such evidence can avail to accredit a person whose coming has been foretold. And this no accurate thinker would for a moment dispute.

In Dean Swift's fierce invective against the Irish bishops of his day, he suggested that they were highwaymen who, having waylaid and robbed the prelates appointed by the Crown, had entered on their Sees in virtue of the stolen credentials. The whole point of this satire lay in the theoretical possibility of the suggestion. Nothing is more difficult in certain circumstances than to accredit an envoy. But, if he be expected, the merest trifle may suffice. An agent is sent upon some mission of secrecy and danger. A messenger will follow later with new and full instructions for his guidance. The messenger is described to him, but his sense of the peril of his position makes him plead that he shall have adequate credentials. In response to his appeal I pick up a scrap of paper, tear it in two, and handing him the half I tell him that the other moiety [half] will be presented by the envoy. No document, however elaborate, would give surer proof of his identify than would that torn piece of paper.

Thus we see in what sense, and how certainly and simply, "external evidence" may avail "to accredit a revelation." And the skeptic's objection being set aside, he is again confronted with the irrefutable force of Paley's argument upon the main issue.

But another question claims notice here, ignored alike by exponent and objector. They have discussed the problem from the purely human standpoint, whereas the revelation offered for our acceptance claims to be Divine. Man is but a creature; can God not speak to him in such a manner that His word shall carry with it its own sanction and authority? To assert that God *cannot* speak thus to man is practically to deny that He is God. To assert that He has never in fact spoken thus involves a transparent *petitio principii* (begging the question). It might be urged that the authenticity of prophecy and promise has been established by their fulfillment. But certain it is that the prophets declare that God did thus speak to them, the Scriptures assume it, and the faith of the Christian endorses it.