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The Proof of Miracles

BY

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The Proof of Miracles.

AN IMPORTANT SUBJECT IN ITS TRUE LIGHT.

IT is unquestionable that miracles constitute one of the greatest difficulties that beset unbelievers who, realizing the meagreness, the nothingness of unbelief, feel drawn to Christianity. This difficulty is rendered all the more insurmountable to them from the fact that so many Christian apologists waive the objections to the proof from miracles, or fail to discern their full force. The subject is of the highest importance, especially when so much is written against miracles, and so little, truth to tell, that satisfactorily explains and defends the argument drawn from them. Assuming that miracles are held by believers to be a revelation of God—a revelation of His intention regarding mankind,—it is

natural that those who have not the gift of faith should find this evidence insufficient. Many persons sincerely desirous of believing, wrongly suppose that the firm, undoubting faith professed by Christians rests on the miracles recorded in the New Testament; whereas they were wrought not as the revelation, but as a witness to the revelation.

The objections which reason could urge against the belief in miracles are nowhere, we think, more frankly stated or more ably refuted than in the newly published life of Dr. Brownson. These objections are presented in a work entitled "Charles Elwood," the purpose of which was to induce the unbeliever to look upon Christianity with more favorable sentiments, and ultimately influence him to seek admission into the Church. The book is not, as some readers have thought, the author's profession of faith at the time when it was written. Dr. Brownson's biographer has done well to analyze this work. Besides vindicating the memory of his illustrious father, he affords an able refutation of the objections to miracles

one so often hears urged. We give the passage entire: it is too important and too well constructed to admit of the slightest abbreviation. If the subject of miracles is treated in any doctrinal work just as it is treated here, we can say that we do not recall the name of the book.

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“The objections to miracles made by Charles Elwood are reducible to three: 1. The miracles are not proved; 2. They can not be proved to have been really miracles; 3. They are valueless as proofs of divine revelation. All actual or conceivable objections to the argument from miracles come under one or another of these three heads.

“The miracles in question are those recorded in the New Testament, which are said to have been publicly performed, and to have been publicly appealed to by our Blessed Saviour and His Apostles in attestation of His divine mission. The first objection alleges that these miracles, or the facts alleged to be miracles, are not proved to have taken place. ‘You allege,’ says Charles, ‘miracles in proof of revelation,



when, in fact, nothing about your revelation, or in it, is more in need of proof than your miracles themselves.' This is no doubt true; for when the miracles are proved all is proved. But the intention of Charles was to assert that what evidence there is of the facts called miracles is insufficient.

"The reason why the evidence in the case is regarded as incomplete is, I apprehend, in the assumption that the miracles being extraordinary facts can not be sufficiently evidenced unless by extraordinary proofs. The evidence we actually have in their favor, all who have examined it at all admit, is equal, to say the least, to that which we have in the case of the ordinary facts of history which no one ever thinks of doubting. No one can deny that the actual amount of testimony we have that there was such a person as Jesus Christ is much greater than that which we have that there was such a person as Julius Cæsar, and that the testimony in favor of any one of His miracles is equal to that which we have in favor of any one of Cæsar's battles. How happens it, then, that men may be found who

believe the latter and not the former? The answer is in the nature of the facts asserted. Cæsar and his acts, it is felt, lie in the order of nature and belong to the ordinary course of events; while Jesus Christ and His acts lie out of the ordinary course of things—are extraordinary in their nature, and therefore demand extraordinary evidence to warrant us in believing them. But is this true? Can any man assign any reason why the evidence which would warrant us in believing that Cæsar invaded Britain should not warrant us in believing that Our Lord fed five thousand persons with five loaves and two fishes?

“No man can say that miracles are not possible,—nay, we all know they are possible; for we know that God can work a miracle if He chooses, since He is omnipotent, and a miracle implies no contradiction. Before He works a miracle we, of course, can not say He will work one, nor can we say that He will not. We have not the least reason for presuming against a miracle, if indeed we have no ground to presume in favor of one. God can as easily raise the dead as create the living; and there is

nothing more absurd in supposing He does raise a dead man to life than there is in supposing that He creates a living man. If it be alleged that He has on a particular occasion, for an end worthy of His character as known by the light of natural reason, actually done so, there is no reason *a priori* why we should not believe it. It becomes a simple question of fact, and is to be believed the same as any other question of fact, on sufficient testimony.

“The miracles, furthermore, recorded in the New Testament as simple facts to be proved are by no means extraordinary facts, but wholly within the reach of our ordinary faculties. Their cause, or the agency by which they are wrought, is not the point to which the witnesses are required to depose. Of that we can judge as well as the witnesses; and it is determined, not by the testimony, but by reason operating on the facts testified to. These facts, as facts to be observed, do not lie out of the order of nature; require no extraordinary powers to recognize them, and therefore no extraordinary evidence to establish them.

“Take as an illustration the feeding of the five thousand persons with five loaves and two fishes. The points in this extraordinary act which require to be proved are very few, very simple, very obvious. Who did the act? How many were fed? How many loaves and fishes were used? How much remained after the multitude had eaten all they wished? Here are all the interrogatories it is necessary to put to the witnesses. The first is a simple question of personal identity, the others are simple questions of numeration, and all are questions of a very ordinary kind, the true answer to which it is by no means difficult to ascertain.

“Suppose the fact to have actually taken place, why would it be more difficult to prove it than it is to prove Leonidas and three hundred Spartans defended the pass of Thermopylæ against the Persians, or that the city of Jerusalem was taken by the Romans under Titus, son of Vespasian? If miracles are possible, if we can presume nothing against their actually being wrought, and if what in regard to them requires to be proved is as easily and as

certainly ascertainable, and as susceptible in its nature of proof, as the ordinary facts of history, it must be conceded that the proof which suffices to prove the ordinary facts of history is all that is needed for them, and we are unreasonable when we demand more. It is not true, then, that reason demands extraordinary proof in the case of the miracles, and that we can not prudently assent to them unless they are sustained by more than the ordinary degree of historical evidence.

"Moreover, this extraordinary evidence is supposed to be necessary because it is also supposed that the faith we are required to elicit by its means is of an extraordinary character. Say there is as ample evidence of the genuineness of the Four Gospels as there is of Virgil's poems or Cicero's orations, it amounts to nothing, it is alleged, because the faith we are required to elicit in the latter case is only of the ordinary kind, and no great harm can result if we chance to be deceived; but with the Gospels it is different. The faith we are required to have in what they record is of an extraordinary kind,

is to be a faith without doubting, and to be made the basis of our whole theoretical and practical life. This faith, it is evident, must have a higher degree of certainty than we can possibly have in any remote historical facts supported only by historical proofs.

“If we were required on the historical evidence of miracles to believe the Scriptures to be written by divine inspiration, and to take whatever they allege as the word of God, no historical evidence would or could suffice. If, again, the faith we are to yield the miracles on the strength of the historical testimony were to be that firm, undoubting faith which we must have in order to be true Christian believers, the testimony would unquestionably be insufficient; and this is the difficulty on this point felt by many sincerely wishing to believe. They see clearly that they can not get from the historical evidence in the case anything like that degree of certainty that the miracles were actually wrought, which they feel they must have in the Christian doctrine in order to be true and firm believers. In this they are right. They

must believe the Christian doctrine with a firmer faith than they do ordinary historical facts. This is the reason why Charles Elwood considers the evidence of the events called miracles not sufficient to authenticate them as actual facts.

"But it is not required that this firm faith be elicited on the strength of the miracles. It is not required to believe them with any firmer faith than the ordinary events of authentic history. If the historical evidence of the miracles is such as to warrant, in the prudent exercise of reason, taking them as actual facts, it is all that is required. Reason, in such case, requires us to take them as true; and to act, in all ordinary action, on them as true is perfectly reasonable. That this is enough for faith, I do not pretend; but that it is enough to warrant prudent action, I do pretend; and this is all that in the case is needed. For the faith that is required to be elicited, the religious faith, that is to come by and by, and by another agency. That faith does not depend on the assent given to the miracles or the strength of the historical testimony. That would be

asking too much. But because the historical testimony does not suffice for religious faith, we must not conclude that it does not suffice for simple intellectual belief, and the removal of the objections which reason could urge against believing.

“The Protestant takes his faith professedly on the authority of the Bible; the Bible on the authority of the miracles; and the miracles on the testimony of history; and therefore has for his faith only the degree of certainty that testimony is capable of giving; which, if sufficient for one or two points, is evidently insufficient as it regards the main body of Christian doctrine, and therefore inadequate for full religious faith. But this is a mistake. The faith, the absolute certainty of faith, does not rest on the miracles; nor depend, in the last analysis, on historical testimony. It comes from another source, and is the gift of God. It can come only through the supernatural elevation of the creditive subject by the infused habit of faith. The belief we seek to produce by means of the miracles is of a different order, and for

the purpose of removing the intellectual obstacle there may be to the operations of divine grace. For such purpose all that is required of the historical testimony is the simple, ordinary faith which we yield to historical facts in general.

"I will not enter into any detail of the historical evidence, but merely remark that the Church—that is to say, the whole body of Christians—has, by a uniform tradition from the first, asserted that the facts actually occurred: they were asserted by those who could not have been deceived, and by their lives and martyr-deaths prove they could not have wished to deceive; the gentile enemies of the Christians conceded the facts; and so did and so do still the Jews, as we learn from their own writings; and in point of fact no ancient events have a tithe of the historical testimony in their favor which the miracles of the New Testament have in theirs. This, it seems to me, removes the second difficulty, and allows us to assert that the events called miracles are both provable and proved.

"But the great difficulty lies further

back, and consists in the doubt whether the events called miracles can be really proved to have been miracles; and if miracles, whether they really prove that God has made us a revelation. A careful examination of the facts enumerated proves that if they were real facts, they were miracles. They are evidently superhuman, and require superhuman power for their production; and as they are all obviously for a good and holy end, they can have been produced only by a good and holy power.

“The argument of Charles Elwood is founded on a false assumption. He makes Mr. Smith admit that man, independently of revelation, supernatural revelation, is in total ignorance of God. He had no right to put this admission into the mouth of his antagonist; for man by natural reason can know something of God. ‘His invisible things, even His eternal power and divinity, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.’* This fact overthrows his whole argument, because it leaves to us the power

* Romans, i, 20.

by natural reason to know enough of God to be able to recognize His seal in the miracle.

“Charles objects to miracles, that we must know as much of God in order to know that the miracle is a miracle and wrought by Him, as the miracle itself can teach us of Him; and therefore the miracle is superfluous. The antecedent is true; the consequent is illogical and false. The miracle can teach us no more of God, in Himself considered, than we knew before, and it is not intended to. The miracle is not wrought as the revelation, but as a witness to the revelation. We must know as much of the character of God before we can recognize Him in the miracle as the miracle can teach us; and yet the miracle may not be superfluous; for it may, though it in itself teaches us nothing new of God, accredit His messenger.

“A minister presents his credentials to a foreign court sealed with the seal of his government. This seal reveals to the foreign government nothing of the intentions of his government; but it authorizes the minister, and proves

that he speaks by the authority of his own sovereign, and that whatever he says is to be considered as said by his sovereign himself. The fallacy of Charles was in assuming that the miracle was intended to be a revelation of God, that is, a revelation of His intention in respect of us. This it undoubtedly is not. If the miracle accredits the miracle-worker as a divine messenger, it accomplishes its purpose; for, by proving him to be from God, it authorizes us to assume that what he says is said by divine authority—that is, by God Himself through him, and therefore that his doctrine is from God." *

To sum up: It is a mistake to believe that extraordinary proofs are required to establish the reality of a miracle. The same sort and the same amount of proof which suffices to authenticate any historical fact, suffices to prove, for example, the feeding of five thousand persons with five loaves and two fishes.

* The Life of Dr. Brownson contains much else of the highest interest and importance. No Catholic library is worthy of the name which does not contain such standard books as the Works and the Life of Dr. Orestes A. Brownson.

No one who believes in God can doubt His *power* to work miracles: it is as easy for Him to raise the dead as to create the living. The miracles of the New Testament are facts as firmly attested as any occurrence of history, and the evidence in their favor would be more than sufficient to prove a case in the strictest court of Christendom. Moreover, if the marvellous facts recounted in the Bible are true, they are necessarily miraculous. We do not know all the laws of nature, but we know some of them, and we know that the multiplication of loaves and fishes is above and beyond natural law. Finally, our reason assures us that miracles and prophecy are the most fitting credentials with which God could endow His revelation to man, and it is unthinkable that God would lend the sanction of the miraculous to a spurious revelation.

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