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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

*Philosophical and
Theological Writings*

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duplication of the same persons and phenomena must not be exactly difficult to satisfy.

§ Thus any man who asserts the infallibility of the evangelists' every word will find that plenty of work remains to be done here too. Let him make the attempt, and answer the ten contradictions which our fragment criticises. But let him answer them all. For merely to offer plausible resolutions of one or other of them and to pass the rest over with triumphant disdain is equivalent to answering none at all.

On the proof of the spirit and of power

... because of the prodigious miracles which may be proved by this argument among many others, that traces of them still remain among those who live according to the will of the Word.

Origen, *Against Celsus*¹

To Director Schumann of Hanover²

Brunswick, 1777

Sir,

Who could be more eager than I to read your new work at once? – I hunger so greatly for conviction that, like Erysichthon,³ I devour anything that looks remotely like food. – If you do the same with this pamphlet, we are two of a kind. I am, with the respect with which seekers after truth never fail to regard each other,

Yours etc. – – –

Fulfilled prophecies which I myself experience are one thing; fulfilled prophecies of which I have only historical knowledge that others claim to have experienced them are another.

¹ Origen, Church Father (c. 185–253), author of *Contra Celsum* [*Against Celsus*], a defence of Christianity against a lost treatise by the pagan Greek philosopher Celsus; Lessing's quotation is from 1.2 of that work.

² Johann Daniel Schumann, theologian and headmaster, had published *Über die Evidenz für die Wahrheit der christlichen Religion* [*On the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity*] in 1777 in an attempt to refute the 'Fragments' of Reimarus. This work is reproduced in B VIII, 355–435.

³ Mythological figure condemned by the gods to insatiable hunger (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII, 739–884).

Miracles which I see with my own eyes, and have an opportunity to assess, are one thing; miracles of which I know only from history that others claim to have seen and assessed them are another.

This is surely incontrovertible? Surely there can be no objections to this?

If I had lived at the time of Christ, the prophecies fulfilled in his person would certainly have made me pay great attention to him. And if I had actually seen him perform miracles, and if I had had no cause to doubt that these were genuine miracles, then I would certainly have gained so much confidence in one who worked miracles and whose coming had been predicted so long before, that I would willingly have subordinated my understanding to his and believed him in all matters in which equally indubitable experiences did not contradict him.

Or, if I were to experience even now that prophecies concerning Christ or the Christian religion, prophecies of whose priority in time I had long been certain, were being fulfilled in the most incontrovertible way; if miracles were performed even now by believing Christians which I had to acknowledge as genuine miracles, what could prevent me from accepting this 'proof of the spirit and of power', as the apostle calls it?⁴

Origen was still in that position, and he was quite correct in saying that, in this proof of the spirit and of power, the Christian religion had a proof of its own which was more divine than any that Greek dialectics could offer. For at his time, 'the power to do miraculous things had not deserted' those who lived in accordance with Christ's precept;⁵ and if he had undoubted examples of this, he had necessarily to acknowledge that proof of the spirit and of power if he did not wish to deny his own senses.

But if I, who am no longer even in Origen's position, who live in the eighteenth century in which miracles no longer happen, if I hesitate now to believe something because of the proof of the spirit and of power which I can believe on other kinds of evidence more appropriate to my time, why is this so?

It is because this proof of the spirit and of power no longer has either spirit or power, but has sunk to the level of human testimonies of spirit and power.

It is because reports of fulfilled prophecies are not fulfilled prophecies; because reports of miracles are not miracles. The *latter* – i.e. prophecies

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2.4.

⁵ Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.2.

fulfilled before my eyes and miracles that happen before my eyes – have an *immediate* effect. But the *former*, i.e. reports of fulfilled prophecies and of miracles, have to act through a medium which deprives them of all their force.

To quote Origen to the effect 'that the proof of power is so called on account of the prodigious miracles which have taken place to confirm the teaching of Christ' is not very helpful if one omits to tell one's readers what Origen says immediately afterwards. For these readers will also consult Origen and discover to their astonishment that he demonstrates the truth of these miracles which occurred at the foundation of Christianity 'by this argument among many others', i.e. from the narrative of the evangelists *among many other things*, but primarily and specifically through the miracles which were still happening then.

If, then, the proof of the proof has now completely disappeared, and if all historical certainty is much too weak to replace this evident but now absent proof of the proof, how can I be expected to believe equally strongly, and with infinitely less cause, those same incomprehensible truths which people believed for the strongest reasons sixteen to eighteen centuries ago?

Or is what I read in reliable historians invariably just as certain as what I experience myself?

I am not aware that anyone has ever made such a claim. On the contrary, it is merely asserted that the reports which we have of these prophecies and miracles are as reliable as historical truths can ever be. – And of course, it is added, historical truths cannot be demonstrated; but one must nevertheless believe them as firmly as one believes demonstrated truths.

My response is as follows. *Firstly*, who will deny – and I do not do so – that the reports of these miracles and prophecies are as reliable as historical truths ever can be? – But then, if they are *only* as reliable as this, why are they suddenly made infinitely more reliable in practice?

And by what means? – By basing on them quite different things, and more of such things, than one is entitled to base on historically demonstrated truths.

If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated *by means of* historical truths.

That is, *contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.*

Thus I do not deny for a moment that prophecies were fulfilled in Christ; I do not deny for a moment that Christ performed miracles. But since the truth of these miracles has ceased entirely to be proved by miracles still practicable today, and since they are merely reports of miracles (however undisputed and indisputable these reports may be), I do deny that they can and should bind me to the least faith in the other teachings of Christ. I accept these other teachings for other reasons.

For *secondly*, what does it mean to consider a historical proposition true, or to believe a historical truth? Does it mean anything in the least different from accepting this proposition or this truth as valid? having no objections to it? being content if someone else bases another historical proposition on it or deduces another historical truth from it? reserving the right to assess other historical things in its light? Does it mean anything in the least different from this? Anything more? Consider this carefully!

We all believe that someone called Alexander lived who in a short time conquered almost the whole of Asia. But who, on the strength of this belief, would risk anything of great and lasting importance whose loss would be irreplaceable? Who, as a result of this belief, would permanently disavow all knowledge that conflicted with this belief? I certainly would not. I have at present no objection to raise against Alexander and his victories; but it might still be possible that they were based on a mere poem of Choerilus,⁶ who accompanied Alexander everywhere, just as the ten-year siege of Troy is based on nothing more than the poems of Homer.

Consequently, if I have no historical objection to the fact that Christ raised someone from the dead, must I therefore regard it as true that God has a Son who is of the same essence as himself? What connection is there between my inability to raise any substantial objection to the evidence for the former, and my obligation to believe something which my reason refuses to accept?

If I have no historical objection to the fact that this Christ himself rose from the dead, must I therefore regard it as true that this same risen Christ was the Son of God?

That the same Christ to whose resurrection I can make no significant historical objection consequently proclaimed himself the Son of God, and that his disciples consequently regarded him as such – all this I most

⁶ Choerilus of Iasus, an undistinguished poet who travelled with Alexander.

willingly accept. For these truths, as truths of one and the same class, follow quite naturally from one another.

But to make the leap from this historical truth into a quite different class of truths, and to require me to revise all my metaphysical and moral concepts accordingly; to expect me to change all my basic ideas on the nature of the deity because I cannot offer any credible evidence against the resurrection of Christ – if this is not a ‘transition to another category’, I do not know what Aristotle meant by that phrase.⁷

It will, of course, be said: ‘But the same Christ of whom you must concede on historical grounds that he raised the dead, and that he himself rose from the dead, said himself that God has a Son of the same essence as himself and that he is this Son.’

This would be all very well, if the fact that Christ said this were not likewise no more than historically certain!

If I were pressed further and told: ‘On the contrary! This is more than historically certain, for we are assured that it is the case by inspired historians who cannot err’, the fact that these historians were inspired and could not err is unfortunately likewise only historically certain.

This, this is the broad and ugly ditch which I cannot get across, no matter how often and earnestly I have tried to make the leap. If anyone can help me over it, I beg and implore him to do so. He will earn a divine reward for this service.

And so I repeat what I said above, and in the same words. I do not deny for a moment that prophecies were fulfilled in Christ; I do not deny for a moment that Christ performed miracles. But since the truth of these miracles has ceased altogether to be proved by miracles still practicable today, and since they are merely reports of miracles (however undisputed and indisputable these reports may be), I do deny that they can and should bind me to the least faith in the other teachings of Christ.

Then what *does* bind me to them? – Nothing but these teachings themselves; whereas eighteen hundred years ago, they were so new, so alien, so incompatible with the whole range of truths then recognised, that nothing short of miracles and fulfilled prophecies was required before the mass of people would pay any attention to them.

But to make the mass pay attention to something means to help common sense to find the right track.

⁷ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.6–7.

It did find that track, and it still follows it; and what it brought to light on either side of the track is the fruits of those miracles and fulfilled prophecies.

And if I see these fruits ripening and ripened before me, am I not supposed to eat my fill of them? Because, while I did not deny or doubt the pious old legend that the hand which scattered the seed had to wash seven times in snails' blood before each throw, I simply disregarded it? – What does it matter to me whether the old legend is true or false? The fruits are excellent.

Suppose there were a great and useful mathematical truth which the discoverer had arrived at by way of an obviously false conclusion. (If there are no such truths, there very well could be.) Should I therefore deny this truth or decline to make use of it, and would I be an ungrateful denigrator of the discoverer if I were unwilling to argue – or indeed believed it quite impossible to argue – that, given his astuteness in other respects, the false conclusion through which he had hit upon the truth *could* not be a false conclusion? –

– I shall end with this wish: may all those whom the Gospel of St John divides⁸ be reunited by St John's Testament! It is admittedly apocryphal, this testament – but not for that reason any the less divine.

⁸ Divides: over the doctrine of Christ's divinity as expounded in John 1.1–14.

The Testament of St John

... who lay on the breast of the Lord and drew the stream of doctrines from the purest source.

Jerome¹

A dialogue

Brunswick, 1777

He and I

He. You were very quick off the mark with this pamphlet; but the pamphlet shows it.

I. Really?

He. You usually write more clearly.

I. For me, the greatest clarity was always the greatest beauty.

He. But I see that you can also get carried away. You begin to think you can refer constantly to things that not one in a hundred readers knows, and that you may yourself have discovered only yesterday or the day before –

I. For example?

He. Don't be so learned.

I. For example?

¹ St Jerome, Church Father (c. 347–420) and translator of the Bible into Latin; the quotation is from the preface to his *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians*.