

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIRACLES

By

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and

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“Mid-Week Forum Hour”

ELEVENTH MID-WEEK FORUM In the series of 1936

MR. OLSEN: In the study of philosophy, Dr. Clark, you must discover many interesting relationships between that subject and the Truths of the Gospel. Ordinarily, one thinks of philosophy, or, at least, of philosophers as being bitterly opposed to orthodox Christianity. Since you publicly advocate the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ, we surmise you do not agree with this opinion of philosophy. Undoubtedly you hold that there can be a truly Christian system of philosophy as capable of rational defense as any pagan system. Could you tell us, then, why so many philosophers do not agree with you, or what problem in philosophy most frequently leads to a rejection of Christianity?

DR. CLARK: My dear Mr. Olsen, my very dear Mr. Olsen, while you pause for breath let me ask you the time-worn example of unanswerable questions - Have you stopped beating your wife yet? In logic, we call this mode of attack the fallacy of many questions, and the only proper reply is to enumerate the questions one at a time and answer them singly. As you say, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord of Glory, and the only Way by which a man can approach God. As you say again, I hold that the Christian can formulate a philosophy even more consistent and rational than the non-Christian. But why non-

Christian philosophers do not agree that this is possible has nearly as many answers as there are non-Christian philosophers. And what problem in philosophy most frequently leads to a rejection of Christianity is a question I hardly dare to face.

MR. OLSEN: As to whether I have stopped beating my wife *yet*, at least, whatever kind of treatment she is receiving she enjoys, for up to the time I left her this morning she had not appealed to any divorce court. But I recognized that my question was fairly broad, and no doubt involves intricacies only a philosopher would think of. But for popular discussion, is there not some outstanding topic which the question brings to your mind?

DR. CLARK: Yes, there is, Mr. Olsen. And with all the proper modifications and cautions which in philosophy remind one of the interminable red tape of bureaucratic inefficiency, I might state that the antithesis between natural law and the miraculous very well fits what you have in mind.

MR. OLSEN: That not only fits the question I asked, Dr. Clark, but it ties in with some reading I have been doing recently. It seems that the older theories of physics were strictly mechanical and deterministic, whereas now physicists are adopting the so-called quantum theory and an indeterministic approach to the universe. I suppose you mean to say this new physics opens the possibility for miracles.

DR. CLARK: You are to be complimented, Mr. Olsen, for keeping up with recent science; but, unfortunately, I mean nothing of the sort. In the first place, the Bible teaches that nothing is left to chance; that every hair of our head is numbered; not a sparrow falleth to the ground without God's notice, and that God works out His determinate Purpose; having chosen His own from all eternity. The Bible emphatically does not present an indeterministic system. In the second place, the quantum theory does not rest on sufficiently firm scientific ground to warrant uncritical acceptance. And, thirdly, I do not see that acceptance of this theory would be very effective in leading its exponents to defend the miracles of the Bible.

MR. OLSEN: Now, there you go and leave me up in the air - deterministic miracles: that sounds strange to me. If an event is determined, how can it be a miracle? And, if a miracle, how can it be determined? I thought a miracle was something inexplicable by the laws of nature. As for the quantum theory, I do not regret dropping that part of the discussion, for I really do not understand it anyway.

DR. CLARK: Do not be alarmed at deterministic miracles, Mr. Olsen. There are various forms of determinism, and the Biblical form is merely that God plans a definite miracle for a definite purpose at a definite time, and no unforeseen, uncontrolled factor can prevent God from accomplishing His purpose. The real question is - Have there been miracles?

MR. OLSEN: Dr. Clark, now we are on common ground, so that I hope we can get to the heart of this question of miracles. The greatest miracle of all, undoubtedly, was the miracle of Christ's resurrection. Paul argued that if Christ be not raised from the dead, our Faith is vain; we are still in our sins. If Christ did not rise from the grave, Christianity is obviously untrue. Now here is a vital question and I will be interested to hear your response - How do you answer philosophic objections to miracles?

DR. CLARK: The first part of the answer, Mr. Olsen, is to state exactly what we mean by miracles. An innocent individual might suppose everyone agrees as to what a miracle is; but we dare not be too innocent in philosophy. One of the frequently repeated arguments against miracles was most forcefully expressed, in modern times, by David Hume. While his complete theory cannot be discussed now, it is to be noted that Hume defines a miracle as a "transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of God." He goes on to say that the laws of nature are established by a firm and unalterable experience; no miracle has ever been observed in any age or country; and, therefore, there is a uniform experience against every miraculous event. Hume here practically defines a miracle as that which has never happened, and so his conclusion follows readily. He assumes that no miracle has ever been observed

and infers that none has occurred. But his assumption is the very thing in dispute.

MR. OLSEN: Well, Dr. Clark, if you have quoted his “Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” correctly, and I suppose you have, it is clear that Hume has assumed what he needed to prove; and I also recall the famous argument documented from Hume’s writings to the effect that there never was a Napoleon any more than a miracle. But Hume’s strict definition of “miracle” is not exactly that which never happened; it is, rather, a transgression of nature’s laws by God.

DR. CLARK: That is correct, Mr. Olsen. While it does not alleviate Hume’s unenviable predicament of assuming his conclusion, yet it calls for a separate remark. The laws of nature, or, to be more concrete, the laws of physics, are formulations of experimental results. The experiments are limited in scope; they deal with but a fraction of human experience. Usually, perhaps always outside of Christian circles, history and its events are banished from science. Science concerns itself with what is repeated time and time again; with what always happens the same way, and the unique events of history are said to be of no significance. Even within the limits of experiment the results do not guarantee anyone law. Every average has its variable error, and within that range of error remarkable things can happen. Now miracles are not necessarily transgressions of any known law of physics. The escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians, by the wind blowing back the Red Sea, was a miraculous deliverance, but it was not beyond the pale of strict science. Hence, I should refuse to define a miracle as a transgression of a natural law. What we are interested in are certain definite events recorded in the Bible; the passing through the Red Sea is one; the resurrection of Christ is another. Now it seems reasonable to view with suspicion the application of a scientific law to material outside the range of scientific experiment.

MR. OLSEN: Your language, Dr. Clark, is becoming too abstract and vague, but I take it you mean that strictly physical experiment cannot prove or disprove the resurrection of Christ any more than it can prove or disprove that Napoleon was Emperor of France.

DR. CLARK: Yes. Mr. Olsen, I mean exactly that; for physics is not history. And, further, even in physics experiments do not force any one law upon us, but give us the choice of an infinite number of possibilities. And the law or theory which a scientist or philosopher chooses depends on some factor more intimate than the experiment. Some may choose a theory which rules out the accounts in the Bible, and, having ruled them out, those persons will refuse to investigate the historical and archaeological evidence, because history is not experimental science. To this attitude, I should reply - Belief in miracles is not precluded by scientific experiment, but by a personal, philosophic choice. Therefore, instead of denying that God has the power to act in the world; instead of assuming an anti-religious philosophy from the start, and rewriting science and history to suit, it would be better to investigate history first and then frame a philosophy to fit the facts. And not only frame an academic philosophy to fit the facts, but accept the God of history and His gifts of redemption from sin, and Life with Him - through the risen Saviour and Lord, Christ Jesus.

MR. OLSEN: Dr. Clark, that was marvelous, and you will not mind my expressing so. There was a lot of meat in what you said, for, of course, it is my view as well as yours, being a believer in the Scriptures, that the miracles are facts as much as any facts of history. Accept the miracles, and one does not have any difficulty in accepting and appreciating God’s Plan of Salvation. I would like to get back to the miracle of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. I have often said that it is the most attested fact in history. I enjoyed the manner in which you presented your viewpoint. I do not think that I am wrong in assuming that you, too, will agree that the resurrection of Christ is the most established fact in history. Would you mind giving a few brief sentences why you believe so, and what are the evidences to substantiate this viewpoint?

DR. CLARK: I would not say, Mr. Olsen, that Christ’s resurrection is the best attested fact in history. After all, there is considerable evidence that Napoleon was Emperor of France. Yet this much we can

say - The resurrection of Christ is better attested than many of the unquestioned events of ancient history. Not to mention the existence of the Church and the celebration of the Lord's Day as evidence, there were five contemporary writers who mentioned it, and any historical criterion which would rule out Christ's resurrection would also virtually annihilate all ancient history. When one accepts Xenophon, Thucydides or Suetonius, and rejects Christian historians, it evinces a deep religious prejudice.

MR. OLSEN: That was very interesting. Now I have two nuts I would like you to crack. You have admirably answered the question regarding the fact of miracles and the general principles of philosophy that enable man to embrace miracles and believe in them. Now, here are two specific miracles - Why do you believe them to be true?

The Record of the first is found in the Book of II Kings, the 6th chapter. There we read:

"But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed.

"And the man of God said, Where fell it? and he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim.

"Therefore, said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it."

That was a strange phenomenon. Do you believe it to be a fact, and why? The second miracle to which I refer also took place on the sea. I have in mind the occasion when our Lord Jesus Christ walked upon the sea. Here, therefore, are two very definite miracles. I repeat, do you believe them to be facts, and why?

DR. CLARK: Our discussion this evening, Mr. Olsen, has centered on miracles in general. Now it is usually good policy not to reopen a general question by bringing forward particular cases. If tonight, instead of arguing about miracles we had demonstrated that murder in general was wrong, there would be no point in asking - Is this particular murder wrong or is that particular murder wrong? We have hinted briefly at the relation between science, history and religion. We have attempted to show that those who deny the possibility of miracles have no scientific proof of their denial; that, indeed, they base their denial, and can only base their denial, on the philosophic assumption that there is no God, no Power superior to the concepts of physics. If a man believes in God, he cannot deny the possibility of miracles. This is the general principle, and specific cases are only a matter of historical investigation.

MR. OLSEN: That was my meaning. Dr. Clark. I did not intend to reopen the general question, but I simply wanted some specific reasons for these two particular miracles.

DR. CLARK: In historical matters. Mr. Olsen, and these miracles are historical matters, we must get our evidence from the documents. The documents must be shown to be trustworthy. To do this, one must check the documents wherever possible, and the better they check with other credible sources, the more credence one may give to them. Now on a previous occasion, Mr. Olsen, we canvassed in this Forum hour some of the archaeological evidence to show that the Bible is true. There is a great mass of such evidence, and it is impossible to explore it this evening. Very remarkably, all this evidence tends to corroborate the Scriptures, and none of it has disproved any part of the Scriptures. The only barrier, therefore, between a man's reason and his belief in these Biblical miracles - the only intellectual barrier - is the assumption of atheism. Another barrier, not strictly intellectual, is sin. When one accepts the historical evidence he is forced to acknowledge that he is a sinner deserving of God's wrath and curse. But if he could only see, also, that the God Who controls all history; that the God Who determines miracles, has also determined a Plan of Redemption - then he might be willing to accept God's grace and trust the One of Whom it is said:

“The winds and the waves shall obey Thy will, Peace, be still! Whether the wrath of the storm-tossed sea, or demons or men, or whatever it be. They all shall sweetly obey Thy will, Peace, peace, be still!”