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“SPIRIT AND POWER”: MODERNITY ON MIRACLES, BIBLICAL STUDIES, AND THE LEAP OF FAITH

Modern interpretation of the Holy Scripture, especially historicocritical exegesis must crash with the classical dogmatic approach. The case in which this crash is unavoidable is the historicity of Jesus Christ and his miraculous deeds. For contemporary mentality miracles are definitely strange so it is not surprising that such kind of interpretation of the Gospels, in which miracles taken literally are excluded, has been occurring for few ages now. Today, we see a debate between exegetes who are deeply engaged in modern rationalistic paradigm and the ones who try to be faithful to the Church testimony in the first place. This article argues that modern exegesis must lead to the leap of faith. Only faith can affirm the truth of the Gospel, taking aside the question of historical character of Jesus' miracles. Ultimately, the case of Jesus is mainly about faith, not only about historical research.

A short history of theological angst surrounding the advent of modern biblical criticism would be a useful and perhaps surprising story to tell. In many ways, of course, it would be simply one more variation on the story of modernity itself. To that degree, the tale belongs as a chapter in Charles Taylor's magisterial *Secular Age*. Indeed, those of us socialized into the exegetical guild could recite like a catechism lesson the specific “coming of age narrative” which functions as our *Grundlegende*. Emancipation from the nonage of ecclesiastical dogma is the predictable cornerstone of the project, whether the version we learned traces the birth of the field back to Luther, Lefèvre, Gabler, or some alternate exegetical hero.

Clustered around such pioneering figures is naturally a great deal of short-sighted, establishment opposition, which becomes the easy prey of retrospective satire. An early, entirely superfluous but revealing confrontation occurs already in the year 1515.¹ Upon publication of Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum*, Maarten van

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¹ For a brief account of the exchange with Dorp, see M. Andersen, *Erasmus the Exegete*, “Concordia Theological Monthly” 40 (1969), p. 722–733.

Dorp, mouthpiece of the faculty of theology at Leuven, formally reproached the humanist's audacity in applying the same philological and text-critical methods to the sacrosanct vulgate that he had laudably used in restoring the original text of Jerome's epistles. Such ignorant obstruction resembles the attitudes one still finds shaping study of the Qu'ran. Erasmus' replied to Dorp at length in a letter appended to his treatise *Praise of Folly*, pleading "what is plain even for the blind to see, that there are often passages where the Greek has been badly translated [...] and often a true and faithful reading has been corrupted by uneducated copyists." In the end, only stultified intransigence would barricade Christian theology against the salubrious ventilation of superior learning. With the added intervention of Thomas More on Erasmus' behalf, the resistance quickly melted and Dorp himself renounced his folly.

Not all resistance dissolves so meekly, of course, and many examples of stultified intransigence could be produced, like the repeated Parisian censures and Roman investigations of Cajetan's remarkable, humanistic biblical commentaries.² Judaizing, Lutheranism, and a lack of reverence for the fathers are among the outlandish allegations. Some resistance is dogged, however, because some fears are more than the illusory phantoms of a decadent theological regime.

Among the most earnest and animating anxieties troubling the rise of modern biblical science is the delicate matter of miracles. Here quite unambiguously the foundations of a whole supernatural religious system are at stake. Already targeted by Erasmus, the rank superstition and overgrowth of so many miraculous medieval legends became an obvious item on the agenda of religious reformers. Three positions ultimately emerged. The "Catholic Enlightenment," to use Ulrich Lehner's phrase, sought to weed out deviant frauds and cultivate a sober, discerning, scientifically informed faith. Protestant controversialists developed, by contrast, a dispensationalist doctrine of cessation. While the wonders of the biblical age were accepted *in toto* as part of God's plan to establish the church and convert men to the Gospel, mass rejection of all subsequent, so-called "ecclesiastical miracles" became a polemical bulwark against the force of Roman claims and popish abuse.³ The third and most radical solution, of course, was the *a priori* rejection of all miracles whatsoever. The awkward posture of the Protestant position is obvious and it felt philosophical pressure especially from the radical side (though Immanuel Kant

² See M. O'Connor, *Cajetan's Biblical Commentaries: Motive and Method*, Leiden 2017, p. 238–249.

³ The title of Anglican Bishop John Douglas' treatise nicely captures the spirit of the teaching: *The Criterion or Rules by which the True Miracles recorded in the New Testament are distinguished from the Spurious Miracles of Pagans and Papists* (1774). "It has long been observed that Popish miracles happen in Popish countries, that they make no converts," W. Paley, *On the Evidence of Christianity*, <https://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/paley/paley-evidences-part-i.pdf> (access: 14.12.2018).

found it a reasonable compromise between social order and Humean thought).⁴ Thus, all through the 18th century, beginning with Locke’s *Discourse on Miracles* in 1706 and peaking with Hume’s celebrated *Essay on Miracles* in 1748, the very possibility of miracles was the occasion for much crossing of swords, as two competing theological worldviews fought for survival.⁵ The liveliness of the debate might be gauged from the case of Thomas Woolston, whose grossly provocative *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Savior* led in 1729 to his imprisonment on charge of blasphemy.

Inscribed within this context of waxing Deism is a tumultuous, little drama that must count as one of the more spectacular failures of the civic guardians of orthodoxy to address the escalation of critical questioning of the Bible: the fantastically obtuse efforts of three successive German pastors to force Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to surrender during the famous *Fragmentenstreit*. The issue concerned the latter’s piecemeal publication of Reimarus’ skeptical thoughts about Christianity and the Bible, supposedly unearthed by Lessing in the library of Wolfelbüttel.⁶ According to Albert Schweitzer’s canonical account, this marks the true beginning of historical Jesus research. The inevitable hullabaloo that resulted from the publication was intended from the outset and stage-managed by the dramaturge as a kind of live theological theater. (In a letter Lessing had promised his brother “a little comedy with the theologians”).⁷ The most famous act is a prolonged, eight-scene joust with Herr Hauptpastor Goeze of Hamburg, whose censorious, sermonizing exhortations to repentance spent the two combatants’ energy in an irrelevant pamphlet war. Less bombastic, yet equally inept was the earlier intervention of one Johann Heinrich Reß, whose chivalrous but confused essay was dispatched with embarrassing ease. Most interesting of all and most decisive is Lessing’s brief exchange with J.D. Schumann, first in this wave of hapless *fidei defensores*.

Perceiving the whole edifice of Christian religion to be under threat by the publication of Lessing’s second “fragment,” which had pressed in the direction of a natural, non-revealed religion, Schumann followed a well-worn apologetic course. He appealed to the fulfilled prophecies and miracles enshrined in the New Testament as universally compelling evidence for the certainty of Christian truth. The work is comparable in this regard to William Paley’s better-known treatise, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), which aimed to answer the challenge posed by Deist critics, especially Hume.

⁴ A. Wood, et al., eds., *Kant: Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason and Other Writings*, Cambridge 1998, p. 98–102.

⁵ See R.M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*, Lewisburg 1981.

⁶ A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the History Jesus*, Minneapolis 2000.

⁷ Letter dated 11 Nov 1774 (Lachmann-Muncker 18.416, p. 117, ll. 12–15).

In cocksure possession of his own superior powers, like Erasmus toying with the schoolmen, Lessing dazzlingly blazed forward on his determined course. In his short tract *Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft* (1777) he answered Schumann with devastating concision. At issue in the title is a phrase of St. Paul and a passage from Origen's *Contra Celsum* (1.2), as summarized by Schumann, which all serves Lessing as a foil.

The doctrine of Jesus has a special type of proof of its own, which is far too lofty and noble to be compared with the Greek art of concluding and proving. The Apostle calls this diviner proof, "the demonstration of the Spirit and of power." He speaks of a proof "of the Spirit" on account of the prophecies, which are so clear and lucid that everyone must be convinced by them. He speaks of a proof "of power" on account of the astounding miracles which occurred to confirm the doctrine of Christ.

This in fact profoundly suggestive text leaves Lessing strangely unmoved. He is pointed and succinct in his principled opposition.

Ein andres sind erfüllte Weissagungen, die ich selber erlebe, ein andres erfüllte Weissagungen, von denen ich nur historisch weiß, daß sie andre wollen erlebt haben. Ein anderes sind Wunder, die ich mit meinen Augen sehe und selbst zu prüfen Gelegenheit habe, ein anderes sind Wunder, von denen ich nur historisch weiß, daß sie andre wollen gesehn und geprüft haben.⁸

Origen, Lessing says, may have himself still enjoyed the possibility of beholding with his own eyes these miraculous demonstrations of divine power and accordingly rightly surrendered his intelligence in belief. "But I, who am not in the situation of Origen, who live in the 18th century, when there are no more miracles [...] [for me] this demonstration of the Spirit and of power has neither Spirit nor power any longer, but is reduced to human testimony to Spirit and power." With a curt wave of the hand Lessing means to silence the whole testamentary value of the Church's scriptures. The report of a miracle is itself no miracle, he protests; it thus commands no convicting power.

The absolute distance Lessing takes here from the existential force of the scriptures is startlingly and elegantly aloof. Even the philosophical question has been implicitly retired. In the course of the Enlightenment miracle debate, this response represents a kind of revolutionary disinterest, an altogether sovereign indifference that wonderfully anticipates the methodologically insulated attitude that now reigns in biblical studies. The content of the bible no longer involves me directly; it obliges no firm metaphysical commitments; it neither forces a claim upon my religious assent nor incites my impassioned rejection. This evacuation of power

⁸ G.E. Lessing, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts und andere Schriften*, Stuttgart 1965, p. 32.

from the biblical text has become an axiomatic protocol of professional good order for modern scholars. Confrontation with the text is made religiously banal.

In part, of course, this neutering of scripture has been as a matter of public policy. In his monograph *The Death of Scripture and Rise of Biblical Studies*, Michael Legaspi highlights the role of post-confessional politics in the German research university of the first portion of the 19th century as a background for scholars’ philological retreat into theological irrelevance.⁹ Beleaguered by incessant, irresolvable sectarian controversy the academic establishment moved (in both conscious and unconscious ways) to defang the Bible: a book that, since the collapse of the medieval consensus into a welter of strident religious dissent, was no longer serving successfully as a social glue for the Protestant world. The explosion of historical Jesus research in the same time and place should be viewed in this same light. Indeed, the new renditions of Moses constructed by scholars like J.D. Michaelis resemble the hunt for a post-confessional Jesus, “a new Jesus” to borrow Flannery O’Connor’s admirable phrase. “A new social order required a new secular consensus around its grounding religious figures.”¹⁰

It should be obvious that as the cultural importance of this religious pantheon continues to recede in the post-Christian west, the secularizing urgency to remove all cause for cholera also fades – which is oddly encouraging for the theologically minded. Sadly the “canonical” status of the Bible as a normative reference in intellectual and social life recedes apace. Religious irrelevance breeds academic irrelevance, to which the increasing disappearance of theology from university life attests. The rescue measures of teaching the Bible as literature or near eastern history or ancient Mediterranean religion are but a series of parachute jumps into the faculty of arts that only hasten the inevitable result. More and more the last vestiges of its sacred origins in *divinity* are effaced, until the professional discipline of “biblical studies” in its modern configuration, that vast federation of microscopic specializations and fashionable methods, vanishes into the academic herd of overgrown humanities departments, indentured to a mercenary publishing industry.

For contemporary biblical study the report of a miracle remains precisely what Lessing called it: the report of a miracle and nothing more. “Miracle discourse,” the Greco-Roman rhetoric of recounting a supposed wonder, has today become the datum rendered to New Testament exegetes as the proper object of their investigation.¹¹ As a matter of principle, the *res* itself, the *magnalium Dei*, the living event in its demonstration of godly power never comes into view for consideration. One is stunted at discourse about discourse about God. Judgment here is not only

⁹ M.C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford 2010.

¹⁰ A. Giambrone, *Schweitzer, Lagrange, and the German Roots of Historical Jesus Research*, “Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus”, forthcoming.

¹¹ See e.g. D. Watson, ed., *Miracle Discourse in the New Testament*, Atlanta 2012; T. Nicklas, J.E. Spittler, eds., *Credible, Incredible*, Tübingen 2013; and B. Kollmann, R. Zimmermann, eds., *Hermeneutik der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen*, Tübingen 2014.

suspended; it is disabled. Contemporary exegetes in their professional capacity are trapped within a perennial, phenomenological *epoché*.

Culturally, then, but also by methodological decision, scripture scholars find themselves squarely within what Taylor calls the “Immanent Frame” – that typically modern worldview, in which the old assumption of God’s agency in history has been eclipsed.¹² “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless [...] and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of [...] miracles.”¹³ So runs the infamous Bultmannian dictum. How to respond? The architects of the *nouvelle théologie* at the same time as Bultmann sought to elaborate the foundations of a new “Christian humanism,” corresponding to an advanced new moment in the history of our secular age.¹⁴ This effort to radically reorient the Church’s theological culture in many ways replayed Erasmus’ hand, assaulting neo-scholastics with gargantuan erudition the way he had abused the late medieval schoolmen. De Lubac’s *surnaturelle* can be seized here as a defining doctrine; for miracles are as representative of the nature-grace debate as the natural desire for God. Is the rejection of *natura pura* then indeed an escape from the iron heavens of the “Immanent Frame”? Or would the exegetes of miracle stories profit from discredited conceptual tools, like the *super*, *contra*, and *extra naturam* of the old manuals?

A great many issues are at play in such questions, which I hardly mean to resolve, but de Lubac’s cartoon of a two-storied universe should not prejudice against the recovery of an unmistakably vertical, biblical worldview. When Paul says in 1 Cor 2:4 that his proclamation of the Gospel was not made with words of human wisdom, but in a demonstration of Spirit and power, he is echoing his clean *kata sarx / kata pneuma* opposition. The display of godly *dynamis* in the community through miracles and overflowing *charismata* marks a superhuman agency for Paul, which issues from beyond the sublunary world: the *dynamis* of a divine Spirit, strong to drive away dark principalities and powers, to inhabit and empower the bodies of believers through ritual acts with water and through sacred meals. Naming this ancient worldview “magical,” which *faute de mieux* has become standard exegetical practice, may successfully evoke a view of things not normed by disenchanting Enlightenment experience; yet it roundly fails to overcome the chauvinistic stance that this view is benighted superstition. Bultmann and his school accordingly wished to argue against magic, “against viewing the soteriological event as taking place apart from man’s will.”¹⁵ The alternative was a demythologized cosmos and an existentially revised self-perception. E.P. Sanders expressed himself rightly dissatisfied with this manner of solution, but also

¹² Ch. Taylor, *Secular Age*, Harvard 2007, p. 274.

¹³ R. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, Minneapolis 1984, p. 5.

¹⁴ See the historical discussion of A.D. Swafford, *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement*, Eugene, OR 2014, p. 25–66.

¹⁵ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Minneapolis 1977, p. 522.

conceptually helpless before the problem: “We seem to lack a category of ‘reality’ [...] which lies between naïve cosmological speculation and magical transference on the one hand and a revised self-understanding on the other.”¹⁶ Jettisoning as naïve the notion of a hierarchical, cosmic superstructure of elemental powers may nicely accommodate de Lubac’s layer-cake critique; but it will not help bridge the alienation of the modern and biblical worlds any more than Bultmann’s eradication of so-called “myths.”

The modern flight from metaphysics – to which we owe the missing category mentioned by Sanders – has visibly re-invested its reality discourse in historical reason. But here too there are problems. Did Jesus multiply the loaves or was it a “miracle” of sharing? Did he walk upon the waves or just well-hidden stones? What *really* happened? When D.F. Struss cut the Gordian knot of this century-old Rationalist-Supernaturalist debate, declaring both sides fundamentally misguided, he contented himself (and many others besides) that in point of fact *nothing* really happened. He thus sought a new source of meaning in mythology. Decades before, Lessing also lightly bounded over the entire problem of the event, but took a rather different course. Did Jesus indeed raise the dead? Did he himself rise from the dead, as we hear reported? Let it be or let it not. For Lessing it does not matter: what the medieval doctors called the historical sense is void of all possible theological force. The *sensus literalis* is non-theological space; the recorded *gesta* are religiously irrelevant deeds. “The Letter is not Spirit,” he says, “and the Bible is not Religion. Consequently, objections against the Letter and against the Bible are not objections against the Spirit and against Religion.”¹⁷

This is the final upshot of Lessing’s momentous move in the final portion of his treatise, where he jumps suddenly from a blithe disinterest in reports of miraculous deeds to a rough dismissal of all historical truths. He sees quite well that miracle reports and history itself must stand or fall together. And neither can serve as a possible basis for Christian religion, Lessing avers: *Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten nie werden*. We are gazing at Lessing’s infamous, unbridgeable ditch.

Das, das ist der garstige breite Graben, über den ich nicht kommen kann, sooft und ernstlich ich auch den Sprung versucht habe. Kann mir jemand hinüberhelfen, der tu‘ es; ich bitte ihn, ich beschwöre ihn. Er verdient ein Gotteslohn an mir.¹⁸

There seems little doubt that Lessing entertained a repudiation of the essential *factum est* of the Christian creed, even if the virtuoso high-wire walker nimbly watched his words. The odious shadow of this abjuration must not mask his more fundamental and more prescient repudiation, however: a rejection of historical

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 522–523.

¹⁷ G.E. Lessing, *Parable...*

¹⁸ G.E. Lessing, *Erziehung...*, p. 34.

positivism, still only dawning and poised to surge in the following years.¹⁹ Lessing's ditch thus serves him ultimately as an earthwork against the assault of any imaginable Reimarus, fortifying a rationally airtight *credo* against any conceivable historical critique. There is a real parallel here to Bultmann's own effort to mount a theology stronger than the severest skepticism, by making Jesus himself an extraneous presupposition. Both men thus stand at the extreme, opposite pole from Schweitzer, who (like a great many of his heirs) meant to found what he called "the religious thinking of the future" upon the *Jesus der Geschichte*.²⁰

Viewed from this more sympathetic perspective, one understands why Kierkegaard in section II of his rambling *Concluding, Unscientific Postscript* pays Lessing such fulsome (but also ironic) praise.²¹ Whether he has finally confessed or undermined Christianity – Kierkegaard says Lessing has succeeded as no other in the arduous task of keeping quiet even while speaking – whether or not Lessing preserved a personal faith, he successfully re-centered the whole question of the certainty of Christian truth, shifting it from an objective, historical demonstration to a seemingly impossible, subjective *Sprung*. It was not a jump the free-thinking Saxon felt prepared to venture and he settled for an abstract, ethical, non-historical, non-biblical religion. The Danish believer, however, like Bultmann in his turn and in his way, cheerfully took the "qualitative leap."

A strong hue of anti-intellectualism colors Kierkegaard's passage to faith and for Lessing, history does not even count as human reason. Does the work of historical criticism thus in the end contribute anything to the search for Christian truth, apart from a witness to the feeble, inconclusive nature of historical claims? Does it reveal anything more than the pressing need for some surer epistemological ground – be it universal reason or radical faith? On the one hand, one appreciates the modesty when a John Meier adds to the repertoire of historical Jesus research the honest shoulder shrug of *non liquet*. At times, the historical evidence is indeed uncertain. On the other hand, there remains at the core of the whole vast project of the so-called "Quest" an unfashionably positivistic hope. This confidence in the ultimate power of historical reasoning to reach real and convincing conclusions remains important and deeply refreshing, however painfully constrained Meier's own criteria-driven model of ratiocination may be (think Regensburg lecture). His playful conceit of an "un-papal conclave" is also an inhibiting factor by its aspiration for universal consensus.

The question thus remains: how far can history go in speaking a theological truth? Farther perhaps than one imagines. A fascinating, largely unnoticed debate

¹⁹ H. White, *Metahistory*...

²⁰ A. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 1. See also A. Giambrone, *Schweitzer, Lagrange, and the German Roots of Historical Jesus Research*...

²¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Post-Scriptum définitif et non scientifique aux miettes philosophiques*, vol. 1, Paris 1977, p. 61–68.

appeared several years ago in the journal *History and Theory*, concerning the proper methodology for handling miracle reports. Though the exchange brought no final resolution, “the metaphysical postulate of naturalism and its correlative empiricist epistemology” are now under direct fire; while the claim is made – with stupefying good sense – that “historians of religion not only need not assume that atheism is true in their research, but should not do so if they want to understand religious people on their own terms.”²² In other words, the systematic, methodological exclusion of miracles, *understood and accounted as miracles*, risks distorting the whole enterprise of historical investigation. From this perspective, it no longer seems that history is obliged to insulate itself from philosophical and theological learning – quite the contrary. Are there not, then, perhaps, from history so conceived, objective reasons that press us toward subjective religious assent? This is certainly the view of the First Vatican Council, which found in miracles and prophecy – let us say in historical proofs – external confirmations (*auxiliis externa*) of God’s revelation.²³

A worthy interlocutor arises at this point and it is a useful exercise to set Lessing in dialogue with John Henry Newman. Here at last is a match for the brash and brilliant gadfly. In his autobiography, Newman identifies the rising tide of skepticism as the great animating theological issue of his life: “the mistake” as he calls it “of subjecting to human judgment those revealed doctrines which are in their nature beyond and independent of it.”²⁴ In his masterful *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman offers his most mature and comprehensive response to this problem by carefully developing his doctrine of the “illative sense.” This famous category – “a grand word for a common thing,” as Newman privately said²⁵ – essentially represents an expanded vision of human rationality, enabling a standard of certainty poised somewhere between Kierkegaard’s willful leap and Lessing’s fastidious submission to narrow *Vernunftswahrheiten*. “Reason never bids us to be certain except on an absolute proof,” Newman insists; and the illative sense is ultimately for him “the true healthy action of our ratiocinative powers, an action more subtle and more comprehensive than the mere apprehension of

²² B.S. Gregory, *No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion*, “History and Theory” 47 (2008), p. 495–519.

²³ *Dei Filius*: “In order that the obedience of our faith be in harmony with reason, God willed that exterior proofs (*auxiliis externa*) of his revelation, viz., divine facts, especially miracles and prophecies, should be joined to the interior helps of the Holy Spirit; as they manifestly display the omnipotence and infinite knowledge of God, they are the most certain signs of the divine revelation” (Denz 3009).

²⁴ J.H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, New York 1968, p. 256; and claiming to determine on intrinsic grounds the truth and value of propositions which rest for their reception on the external authority of the Divine Word One recognizes here the outlook intoned in Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, but also the same historical skepticism that troubled Lessing and finally moved him in Kant’s direction.

²⁵ J.H. Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, vol 24, C.S. Dessain, et al., eds., Oxford 1973, p. 375.

a syllogistic argument.”²⁶ No deductive bridge is built to span Lessing’s ditch; and the crossing proposed by the illative sense never aims to reach a promised land of pure *Vernunftswahrheiten*. Newman seeks a truth larger than geometrical proof can offer; his existential object is “real” not merely “notional” assent.

The “real-notional” distinction is admittedly not free of difficulties. As H. H. Price says, it seems that all assent has something notional about it and Newman has perhaps “set up a hard and fast distinction of kind, where there is in fact a rather complicated distinction of degree.” The language of a robust *ad rem* manner of thought, nevertheless, remains evocative and useful. Set in contrast with a removed, theoretical apprehension, it resembles John Meier’s own somewhat perplexing distinction, at the very opening of his *Marginal Jew*, between “the real Jesus” and “the historical Jesus.” In an age when history serves as the language of the real, it is revealing that even this “real Jesus” is likened to a historical reconstruction, like the “real Richard Nixon” advertised by a well-documented biography.²⁷ Whatever exactly Meier means to achieve with his precise pairing—which also recalls the more dubious “Christ of faith/Jesus of history” divide—it is clear that by consciously centering his project upon the later Meier forgoes the hope of knowing the “real Jesus” through any exercise of historical reason (since the evidence is too sparse) and he promises to deliver us only a fragmentary “modern abstraction and construct.”²⁸ That this resulting, fragmentary abstraction should lack all the motive force of religion would be obvious to Newman, who reserved religious power to an apprehension of the real. Meier’s historical Jesus may indeed be credited with deeds anemically “claimed by some participants or observers to be a miracle.”²⁹ In other words, something happened, whatever it was; and “the sins of ecclesiastical recall did not thoroughly corrupt everything.”³⁰ But Meier’s “historical Jesus” does not rise from dead – though we may imagine his “real Jesus” presumably did. Lessing’s victory is beyond complete: in Meier’s view, even to engage the reports of the resurrection would be to confuse theology and history, contaminating the latter with the former. So much for N.T Wright’s “shooting at the sun.”³¹ Here is a “gran rifiuto” for some Dante to damn. “*Noli Me Tangere*,” William Lane Craig entitles his article on the subject, “Why John Meier Won’t Touch the Risen the Lord.”³²

²⁶ J.H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Notre Dame 1979, p. 251

²⁷ J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, New York 1991, p. 21.

²⁸ J. Meier, *Roots of the Problem...*, p. 25.

²⁹ J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, New York 1994, p. 514.

³⁰ D. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*, Grand Rapids 2010, p. 23.

³¹ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis 2003, p. 3–31.

³² W. Lane Craig, *Noli Me Tangere: Why John Meier Won’t Touch the Risen Lord*, “Heythrop Journal” 2009, p. 91–97.

Newman understood his own historical research in a different, quite challenging way. To investigate sacred history was not simply some specialization within the historians’ art – an interest in ecclesiastical themes, as one might indulge a taste for fourteenth century English land deeds or Russian railroads after 1850. For Newman, church history was a fully theological science, a study of the real, not a subject matter. It could call upon premises of perennial philosophy and assumed faith’s assent; its object was the very medium of divine providence and revelation. “The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man can also do), but also by things themselves” (I, 1.10).

In his two essays *On Biblical* and *On Ecclesiastical Miracles*, written separately while still an Anglican cleric, Newman develops certain criteria of judgement that answer Lessing’s out-of-hand dismissal of miracle reports. Most significantly, eyewitness testimony holds inherent value in Newman’s estimation, “the credibility [...] of Testimony depending,” as he says, “on the evidence of honesty and competence in those who give it.”³³ This critical attention to the value of witness is a foundational mark dramatically missing from the criteriology of modern exegetes, although it has entered the discussion since Richard Bauckham’s epochally important and controversial, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.³⁴ I believe that we have here the key to embracing *Dei Verbum* 19 on the historicity of the Gospels.³⁵

The heritage of a radical, modern western individualism must be flagged in Lessing’s *a priori* rejection of witness reports. This is a major plank, as well, in Hume’s position.³⁶ The social character of knowledge, the fundamental, inter-personal place of testimony and transmission in our basic epistemic condition, is

³³ J.H. Newman, *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles* (The Works of Cardinal John Henry Newman VIII), Notre Dame 2010, p. 75. Witness – desire of gain or power or other temporal advantage? Party spirit or rivalry? Previous character for falsehood, inconsistencies or prevarications in the testimony? Deficient examination? Enthusiasm, ignorance or habitual credulity? Endorses a cause already embraced? Love of the marvelous, novelty?

³⁴ R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness testimony*, Grand Rapids 2006.

³⁵ A. Giambrone, *The Quest for the Vera et Sincera de Jesu: Dei Verbum §19 and the Historicity of the Gospels*, “Nova et Vetera” 13 (2015), p. 87–123.

³⁶ While general considerations clearly play a major role – are miracles possible in the first place, for instance – abstractions emphatically cannot decide the question. In an apposite text from the *Grammar*, Newman quotes the famous argument of Hume that since we have no experience of a violation of natural laws and much experience of the violation of truth, “we may establish it as a maxim that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.” It is a sentiment in full concord with Lessing. With Newman, however, we may happily accept Hume’s general proposition, yet resist its entire pretended force. For the question of miracles is not whether human fabrications are *in general* more common than infringements in the laws of nature. They certainly are. At issue is the quite specific question whether in this case the testimony of this concrete individual in these circumstances rationally warrants assent. This is precisely what carries us from the notional to the real: Do I accept this testimony of Peter or John?

subjected to an automatic, excessive suspicion and finally subordinated to the gold-standard of my own private perceptions and cogitation. This heritage has clearly infected modern biblical hermeneutics in very substantial ways, from the open distrust of tradition to its queer indifference to and irritability concerning all eyewitness claims. Newman's approach is wary of systematic doubt and much more congenial to a common-sense philosopher like Hume's contemporary Thomas Reid, who accorded an equal place in the work of reason to both the "social" and the "solitary operations of mind." It is a salutary perspective. What is above all important, however, is that like Lessing, Newman grasps that historical knowledge as such is stake in the question: "In proof of miraculous occurrences we must have recourse to the same kind of evidences as that by which we determine the truth of historical accounts in general [...] Testimony being the main assignable medium of proof for past events of any kind."³⁷ The decision about miracles *is* the decision about history and *vice versa*. The two will fall or stand together as one reckons witness.

Lessing's ditch is real, but typically he has over-dramatized the whole affair. It is nearly robbed of all force by a simple, old distinction: not *evidenter vera*, but *evidenter credibilia*.

Thus: Wenn ich... historisch nichts darwider einzuwenden habe, daß Christus einen Toten erweckt, muß ich darum für wahr halten, daß Gott einen Sohn habe, der mit ihm gleiches Wesen sei?

– *No, but you would have reason to do so.*

Wenn ich historisch nichts darwider einzuwenden habe, daß dieser Christus selbst von dem Tode auferstanden, muß ich darum für wahr halten, daß ebendieser auferstandene Christus der Sohn Gottes gewesen sei?

– *No, but the claim grows increasingly trustworthy.*

The ditch may be a parry to ward off skepticism, a preemptive answer to the next, disturbing fragment Lessing meant to leak: Reimarus' aggressive thrust against the resurrection. It would have been better, however, to hold the historical field and fight. In the end, the decision about miracles boils down to a decision about the resurrection; and Lessing who saw no miracles, saw no need for this historical truth.

Between Spirit and power, Newman for his part clearly preferred the former. Prophecy, he notes, "is a growing evidence, and appeals more forcibly than Miracles to those who are acquainted with the Miracles only through testimony."³⁸ Thus,

³⁷ J.H. Newman, *Two Essays...*, p. 13.

³⁸ J.H. Newman (*Two Essays*, p. 8) observes: "Miracles are but a branch of the evidences, and other branches have their respective advantages. Prophecy, as has been often observed, is a growing evidence, and appeals more forcibly than Miracles to those who are acquainted with the Miracles only through testimony [...]. Nor must it be forgotten that the evidences of Revelation are cumulative, that they gain strength from each other; and that, in consequence, the argument

his *Grammar* ends with an eloquent, illative proof built around this biblical base. In opting for prophecy rather than signs, Newman follows the tack of a worthy teacher, who when asked for a sign gave a in return only a prophecy of his death and resurrection (Matt 12:38–40) and who, on the road to Emmaus, before he opened his disciples’ eyes to recognize him resurrected and standing there before them, first opens their minds to understand what the scriptures foretold (Luke 24:26,31). There is undoubtedly something different in the act of faith in these two cases, receiving a miracle and a prophecy. One sort of data is more naturally received and the infusion of grace is different on each side. With this and a brief nod to my own area of research I will conclude.

As it happens, a study of Greco-Roman “miracle discourse” shows an interesting resemblance of St. Luke to the ancient paradoxographers, those pseudo-scientific authors who collected reports of freaks and wonders and urged their truth with the guarantee of eyewitness. None of the standard historiographical mechanisms for audience verification are included and one must simply trust the author’s word. In this light, Luke is incredibly bold in openly coloring his tale like a ghost story: “They thought they were seeing a ghost [...] a ghost does not have flesh and bones” (Luke 24:37,39). His use of the Greek word λῆρος – “it seemed to them [literally] like trash or humbug (Luke 24:11)” – suggests a story one might find in some Greco-Roman tabloid. Like the disreputable paradoxographers, Luke knows the unbelievable nature of his claim and like a first-century *Ripley’s Believe or Not* he makes a naked appeal to faith. It is not a *credo quia absurdam* (which is a slander of Voltaire and was never Tertullian’s phrase),³⁹ but one is, nonetheless, challenged to assent to Luke’s report of Jesus as one is challenged simply to swallow or reject a certain Phlegon of Tralles’ report of one Philinnion, a fully corporeal, eating and drinking (and copulating) revenant. “In this regard the evangelist’s ethical appeal resembles that of [...] Phlegon, who even openly confronts his readers with a decision about his own credulity. ‘One should not disbelieve the foregoing narrative,’ he repeats. The seriousness of both authors as trustworthy researchers is on trial – as is, inevitably, more profoundly the *reader’s* judgment.”⁴⁰ Such *miracle discourse* itself thus breaks the frame of the *epoché* and grabs us. One must decide or make the *gran rifiuto*. Is it true or is it so much λῆρος? Shall the evangelist and his witnesses be believed? This is how the raw miracle of Jesus’ resurrection confronts us: tilted to the Kierkegaardian side of the ledger.

from Miracles is immensely stronger when viewed in conjunction with the rest, than when considered separately.”

³⁹ P. Harrison, *I Believe Because it is Absurd*: *The Enlightenment Invention of Tertullian’s Credo*, “Church History” 86 (2017), p. 339–364.

⁴⁰ A. Giambone, ‘Eyewitnesses from the Beginning’: *Apologetic Innovation and the Resurrection in the Autopsy of Luke-Acts*, “Revue biblique” 124 (2017), p. 211.

What then of Lessing and *notige Vernunftswahrheiten*? “Was it not *necessary* that the messiah should suffer these things and so enter into his glory”? Lessing might have fared better considering prophecy rather than signs, for as Aquinas says, even the contingent truths of history acquire an aspect of necessity when viewed from the perspective of *prophetic knowledge*. The famous Lukan *dei* thus plants us suddenly in a very different realm of discourse and I would argue that we apprehend in this “it is necessary to die and rise” a fixed idea not only of the “real” but even of the “historical Jesus” – certainly of the “Jesus of memory” to adopt the latest tag. I believe, moreover that one might show to the satisfaction of historical reason that Jesus of Nazareth had this idea from his knowledge and interpretation of scripture (cf. Luke 22:37; 24:25–27; Mark 8:31; 14:27; 49; Matt 26:31–35, 53–54,56; John 1:51; 3:14–15; 13:18).⁴¹ He was convicted and announced in advance that he must die and rise—here again “ecclesiastical recall did not thoroughly corrupt everything.” This is no little result: “To foresee one’s death is one thing; to foresee one’s resurrection after three days is quite another [...]. Foretelling a miracle *super naturam* is itself *super naturam*.”⁴² That what Jesus foretold was also fulfilled thus circles us back to the stumbling block of the sign of Jonah – though this time with new evidence in its favor. Such cycles can be repeated a thousand ways from a thousand angels; but the breakthrough comes when God opens our eyes. Hence, white smoke from the un-papal conclave is never an assured result. I wonder, though, if this merely means that when the social tables are turned, the civic guardians of the post-Christian creed can be as worried and intransigent as the old caste of ecclesiastics. After all, the pull leading from an historical to some theological assent can sometimes grow irresistibly strong, so that an illative instinct intervenes, sending the signal to resist and dig-in for trench warfare. This goes, importantly, for both sides. Yet, for those exegetes who have the historical mind of Christ, the ditches dug by doubters are but “difficulties,” crossed with a little hop made easy by grace.⁴³

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⁴¹ Jesus read Israel’s scriptures with an eye for its prophecies and for that great, pervasive pattern of the death-and-resurrection of the beloved son, which the Jewish scholar Jon Levenson has found underwriting the length and breadth of the tradition. See J. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, New Haven 1993.

⁴² A. Giambrone, *The Prophetic Knowledge of Jesus and the Gospels*, “Nova et Vetera”, forthcoming.

⁴³ J.H. Newman, *Grammar...*

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„W DUCHU I MOCY”. WSPÓŁCZESNE PODEJŚCIE DO CUDÓW, BADANIA BIBLIJNE I DECYZJA WIARY

Streszczenie

Nowoczesny sposób interpretacji Pisma Świętego, w tym zwłaszcza egzegeza historyczno-krytyczna, w wielu punktach musi zderzyć się z podejściem kościelno-dogmatycznym. Kwestią, która rodzi w tym spotkaniu szczególnie dużo wątpliwości, jest historyczność Jezusa, a zwłaszcza czynionych przez Niego cudów. Dla nowoczesnej mentalności cuda są czymś skrajnie obcym, toteż od kilkuset lat pojawiają się próby takiej interpretacji przekazu Ewangelii, która wykluczyłaby literalne przyjmowanie opisów wydarzeń cudownych. Również i dziś w egzegezie toczy się pewien spór pomiędzy tymi, którzy mocno tkwią w nowoczesnym, racjonalistycznym paradygmacie, a tymi, którzy starają się być zakorzenieni nade wszystko w tradycyjnej teologii. Niniejszy artykuł dowodzi, że współczesna egzegeza z konieczności prowadzi do decyzji wiary. Tylko owa wiara może opowiedzieć się za prawdą Ewangelii, niezależnie od kwestii historycznego charakteru opisów cudów w tekstach biblijnych. Ostatecznie sprawa Jezusa i Jego cudów jest sprawą wiary, a nie samych badań historycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: cuda, egzegeza, modernizm, Jezus historyczny, zmartwychwstanie