

Science and Religion: Faith and Doubt

David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) [Trans. George Eliot, 1846]

§ 133. PRODIGES ATTENDANT ON THE DEATH OF JESUS.

According to the evangelical accounts, the death of Jesus was accompanied by extraordinary phenomena. Three hours before, we are told, a darkness diffused itself and lasted until Jesus expired (Matt. xxvii. 45 parall.); in the moment of his death the veil of the temple was torn asunder from the top to the bottom, the earth quaked, the rocks were rent, the graves were opened, and many bodies of departed saints arose, entered into the city, and appeared to many (Matt v. 51 ff. parall.). These details are very unequally distributed among the Evangelists: the first alone has them all; the second and third merely the darkness and the rending of the veil: while the fourth knows nothing of all these marvels.

We will examine them singly according to their order. The *darkness* σκοτος which is said to have arisen while Jesus hung on the cross, cannot have been an ordinary eclipse of the sun, caused by the interposition of the moon between his disc and the earth, since it happened during the Passover, and consequently about the time of the full moon. The gospels however do not directly use the terms εκλειψις του ηλιου (*eclipse of the sun*), the two first speaking only of *darkness* σκοτος in general; and though the third adds with somewhat more particularity: και εσκοτισθη ο ηλιος, and *the sun was darkened*, still this might be said of any species of widely extended obscuration. Hence it was an explanation which lay near at hand to refer this darkness to an atmospheric, instead of an astronomical cause, and to suppose that it proceeded from obscuring vapours in the air, such as are especially wont to precede earthquakes. That such obscurations of the atmosphere may be diffused over whole countries is true; but not only is the statement that the one in question extended επι πασαν or ολην την γην, i.e., according to the most natural explanation, over the entire globe, to be subtracted as an exaggeration of the narrator: but also the presupposition, evident in the whole tenor of their representation, that the darkness had a supernatural cause, appears destitute of foundation from the want of any adequate object for such a miracle. Since then, with these accessory features the event does not in itself at once carry the conviction of its credibility, it is natural to inquire if it have any extrinsic confirmation. The fathers of the church appeal in its support to the testimony of heathen writers, among whom Phlegon especially in his χρονικους is alleged to have noticed the above darkness: but on comparing the passage preserved by Eusebius, which is apparently the one of Phlegon alluded to, we find that it determines merely the Olympiad, scarcely the year, and in no case the season and day of this darkness. More modern apologists appeal to similar cases in ancient history, of which Wetstein in particular has made a copious collection. He adduces from Greek and Roman writers the notices of the eclipses of the sun which occurred at the disappearance of Romulus, the death of Cæsar, and similar events; he cites declarations which contain the idea that eclipses of the sun betoken the fall of kingdoms and the death of kings; lastly he points to Old Testament passages (Isa. l. 3; Joel iii. 20; Amos viii. 9; comp. Jer. xv. 9) and rabbinical dicta, in which either the obscuring of the light of day is described as the mourning garb of God, or the death of great teachers compared with the sinking of the sun at mid-day, or the opinion advanced that at the death of exalted hierarchical personages, if the last honours are not paid to them, the sun is wont to be darkened. But these parallels, instead of being supports to the credibility of the evangelical narrative, are so many premises to the conclusion, that we have here also nothing more than the mythical offspring of universally prevalent ideas,—a Christian legend, which would make all nature put on the weeds of mourning to solemnize the tragic death of the Messiah.

Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” from *Essays and Reviews* (1860)

Any true doctrine of inspiration must conform to all well-ascertained facts of history or of science. The same fact cannot be true and untrue, any more than the same word can have two opposite meanings. The same fact cannot be true in religion when seen by the light of faith, and untrue in science when looked at through the medium of evidence or experiment. It is ridiculous to suppose that the sun goes around the earth in the same sense in which the earth goes round the sun, or that the world appears to have existed, but has not existed during the vast epochs of which geology speaks to us... The Christian religion is in a false position when all the tendencies of knowledge are opposed to it. Such a position cannot be long maintained, or can only end in the withdrawal of the educated classes from the influence of religion.

Dean John William Burgon, *Inspiration and Interpretation* (1861)

The BIBLE is none other than the Voice of Him that sitteth upon the Throne! Every book of it—every chapter of it—every verse of it—every word of it—every syllable of it—(where are we to stop?) every letter of it—is the direct utterance of the Most High! The Bible is none other than the word of God— not some part of it more, some part of it less, but all alike, the utterance of Him, who sitteth upon the Throne—absolute—faultless—unerring—supreme.

Bishop J.W. Colenso, *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (1862)

My own knowledge of some branches of science, of Geology in particular, had been much increased since I left England; and I now knew for certain, on geological grounds, a fact, of which I had only had misgivings before, viz., that a Universal Deluge, such as the Bible manifestly speaks of, could not possibly have taken place in the way described in the Book of Genesis, not to mention other difficulties which the story contains. I refer especially to the circumstance, well known to all geologists, . . . that volcanic hills exist of immense extent in Auvergne and Languedoc, which must have been formed ages before the Noachian Deluge, and which are covered with light and loose substances, pumice-stone &c., that must have been swept away by a Flood, but do not exhibit the slightest sign of having ever been so disturbed....the Pentateuch, as a whole, cannot personally have been written by Moses, or by anyone acquainted personally with the facts which it professes to describe, and, further, that the (so-called) Mosaic narrative, by whomsoever written, and though imparting to us, as I fully believe it does, revelations of the Divine Will and Character, cannot be regarded as historically true.

John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864)

Many persons are very sensitive of the difficulties of religion; I am as sensitive of them as any one; but I have never been able to see a connexion between apprehending those difficulties, however keenly, and multiplying them to any extent, and on the other hand doubting the doctrines to which they are attached. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulty and doubt are incommensurate.... A man may be annoyed that he cannot work out a mathematical problem, of which the answer is or is not given to him, without doubting that it admits of an answer, or that a certain particular answer is the true one. Of all points of faith, the being of a God is, to my own apprehension, encompassed with most difficulty, and yet borne in upon our minds with most power.

People say that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is difficult to believe; I did not believe the doctrine till I was a Catholic. I had no difficulty in believing it, as soon as I believed that the Catholic Roman Church was the oracle of God, and that she had declared this doctrine to be part of the original revelation. It is difficult, impossible, to imagine, I grant;—but how is it difficult to believe?...

Supposing then it to be the Will of the Creator to interfere in human affairs, and to make provisions for retaining in the world a knowledge of Himself, so definite and distinct as to be proof against the energy of human scepticism, in such a case,—I am far from saying that there was no other way,—but there is nothing to surprise the mind, if He should think fit to introduce a power into the world, invested with the prerogative of infallibility in religious matters.... And thus I am brought to speak of the Church's infallibility, as a provision, adapted by the mercy of the Creator, to preserve religion in the world, and to restrain that freedom of thought, which of course in itself is one of the greatest of our natural gifts, and to rescue it from its own suicidal excesses....I am defending myself here from a plausible charge brought against Catholics, as will be seen better as I proceed. The charge is this:—that I, as a Catholic, not only make profession to hold doctrines which I cannot possibly believe in my heart, but that I also believe in the existence of a power on earth, which at its own will imposes upon men any new set of *credenda*, when it pleases, by a claim to infallibility; in consequence, that my own thoughts are not my own property; that I cannot tell that tomorrow I may not have to give up what I hold today, and that the necessary effect of such a condition of mind must be a degrading bondage, or a bitter inward rebellion relieving itself in secret infidelity, or the necessity of ignoring the whole subject of religion in a sort of disgust, and of mechanically saying every thing that the Church says, and leaving to others the defence of it. As then I have above spoken of the relation of my mind towards the Catholic Creed, so now I shall speak of the attitude which it takes up in the view of the Church's infallibility....

We live in a wonderful age; the enlargement of the circle of secular knowledge just now is simply a bewilderment, and the more so, because it has the promise of continuing, and that with greater rapidity, and more signal results. Now these discoveries, certain or probable, have in matter of fact an indirect bearing upon religious opinions, and the question arises how are the respective claims of revelation and of natural science to be adjusted. Few minds in earnest can remain at ease without some sort of rational grounds for their religious belief; to reconcile theory and fact is almost an instinct of the mind. When then a flood of facts, ascertained or suspected, comes pouring in upon us, with a multitude of others in prospect, all believers in revelation, be they Catholic or not, are roused to consider their bearing upon themselves, both for the honour of God, and from tenderness for those many souls who, in consequence of the confident tone of the schools of secular knowledge, are in danger of being led away into a bottomless liberalism of thought.