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The Foundations of Revealed Religion 100 Years before David Hume: The Contribution of Anthony Collins

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Abstract

In this dissertation I examine the contributions of Anthony Collins (1676-1729) to the eighteenth-century debate about the grounds of Christianity. I show that by the early eighteenth-century British philosophers addressing this topic had begun to abandon appeals to miracles in favor of appeals to the completion of Old Testament prophecy. I argue that this alternative was short lived, in large part because of the critical work of Anthony Collins. This episode in the debate is often overlooked but without it, later discussions of miracles, including those of David Hume in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, would have been anti-climactic — refutations of an argument that many of those arguing for the truth of Christianity were already prepared to give up on.

There are a number of passages in the Bible warning of false prophets who work miracles in an attempt to gain credence. In the first two chapters I show that thinkers such as Hobbes, Boyle, and Locke were aware of these passages and concerned with developing criteria for whether the source of a miracle is divine or demonic. Their solutions only gave rise to increasingly serious further problems, which I trace under the titles of the circularity problem, the establishment problem, and the self-reference problem. The last of these naturally motivates a turn away from appeals to miracles to the alternative argument from the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. I discuss the difference between this argument and the argument from miracles in chapter 3, and show how it was ironically refuted by Collins. An ironic outcome of Collins's ironic attack was a renewed emphasis on the argument from miracles, one that seems to have set aside many of the earlier doubts and difficulties. When Hume's later argument against credible testimony for the occurrence of a miracle eventually appeared, it seemed more devastating than it would have been only a generation earlier.

Keywords

Anthony Collins, Thomas Hobbes, Robert Boyle, John Locke, Revealed Religion, Miracles, Early Modern Philosophy, William Whiston, Prophecy, England

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Introduction

Anthony Collins (1676—1729) is a philosopher often remembered for his involvement in a number of scholarly disputes. He was a close associate and correspondent with John Locke near the end of Locke's life and Locke spoke very highly of Collins in his letters.¹ One of Collins's early books, *An Essay concerning the Use of Reason* (1707), uses a broadly Lockean epistemology to investigate reason's place in religion.² Around the same time, Collins was involved in an extended correspondence with Samuel Clarke over the possibility of thinking matter.³ Following this, he wrote *A vindication of the Divine Attributes* (1710), which is a response to Archbishop King's attempt to reconcile divine predestination and the freedom of the will.⁴ In the same year, he also wrote *Priestcraft in Perfection*, a pamphlet arguing against the power and influence of the clergy.⁵ This is an issue that he returned to near the end of his life in *An Historical and Critical Essay on the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1724).⁶ He wrote *A Discourse on Free-thinking* (1713), which urges reason's freedom from authority, and *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (1717) which argues for a compatibilist account of free will.⁷ A thread of anti-clericalism unites most of Collins work. He was a lifetime critic of Church authority and following from this, had critics among both high and low churchmen. Although he didn't invent the term

¹ For example in a letter from October 29th, 1703, (Letter #3361) Locke said to Collins, "[I]f I were now setting out in the world I should think it my great happiness to have such a companion as you who had a true relish of truth, would in earnest seeke it with me, from whom I might receive it undisguised, and to whom I might communicate what I thought true freely." And, again in a letter from April 3rd, 1704 while talking about the *Essay*, "Though I know nobody that understands it so well, nor can give me better light concerning it." John Locke, *The Correspondence of John Locke* (vol. 8), (ed.) E. S. de Beer, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1989.

² [Anthony Collins]. *An Essay concerning the Use of Reason in Proposition, the Evidence whereof depends on Human Testimony*, 2nd ed., London, 1709.

³ Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins. *The Correspondence of Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins, 1707-08*, (ed.) William Uzgalis, Broadview Editions. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011.

⁴ [Anthony Collins]. *A Vindication of the Divine Attributes, in some Remarks on his Grace the Archbishop of Dublin's Sermon intituled "Divine Predestination consistent with the Freedom of Man's Will*, H. Hills: London, 1710.

⁵ [Anthony Collins]. *Priestcraft in Perfection*, 3rd ed., London: B. Bragg, 1710.

⁶ [Anthony Collins]. *An Historical and Critical Essay on the Thirty Nine Articles*, R. Francklin: London, 1724.

⁷ [Anthony Collins]. *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, London, 1713; [Anthony Collins]. *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty*, 1st ed., Robinson: London, 1717.

“free-thinking” his *Discourse of Free-thinking* is a classic early statement of this movement stressing reason’s freedom from authority. In addition, he is often identified as a deist. When this term is defined as an interest in favoring natural religion while restricting the role of revelation, it certainly applies to Collins.⁸ It is also an open question whether he should be read as an atheist,⁹ or not.¹⁰

Near the end of his life, Collins was involved in a debate about establishing a ground for Christianity through the use of biblical prophecy. In *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) Collins presented an ironic argument that undermines appealing to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy as a justification for the truth of Christianity.¹¹ He responded to critics in *A Letter to the Author of the Grounds and Reasons* (1726), *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1726), and *A Letter to Dr. Rogers* (1727).¹² I set out to show that these works made a significant contribution to the early modern debate about revealed religion.

The inspiration for this project came after a spring and summer reading Collins’s collected works. Early in his career, in *An Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, Collins considered the topic of religious mystery and argued against the legitimacy of the distinction between propositions that are above reason and those that are contrary to reason. Concerns about Priestcraft and the authority of the church are often present in his philosophical work, and Collins’s regular use of irony started early in his career and continued throughout. In *A Discourse of the Ground and Reasons of the Christian Religion* Collins’s use of irony is at its peak. During the debate that this book started, Collins and his critics agreed—in accord with

⁸ The definition of “deism” has long been under debate. A definition like this can be found in M. A. Stewart. “Revealed Religion: The British Debate,” in (ed.) Knud Haakonssen, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, 2006, 688,

⁹ David Berman. *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*. New York: Croom Helm, 1988, 70-82.

¹⁰ O’Higgins, James. *Anthony Collins: The Man and His Work*, The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970.

¹¹ [Anthony Collins]. *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*, London, 1724.

¹² [Anthony Collins]. *A Letter to the Author of the Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*, London: A. Moore, 1726; [Anthony Collins]. *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered*, London, 1727; *A Letter to Dr. Rogers, on Occasion of his eight Sermons, concerning the Necessity of Divine Revelation*, London 1727.

what seems to have been the majority opinion—that the performance of a miracle is only useful for grounding the truth of Christianity in so far as the performance of that miracle is a part of the exact completion of biblical prophecy. Otherwise, miracles are not important. This is the “argument from prophecy.” This argument holds that Christianity is true because the New Testament successfully completes the prophecy of the Old Testament. The force of this argument as a ground for Christianity comes from the fact that the Old Testament is the holy book of the Jews—a rival religion. The Old Testament was compiled, maintained, and protected from forgery by their religious leaders. This is a group of people who at best (for Christianity) have no interest in Christianity’s success, and at worst actively do not want Christianity to succeed. Given this, showing that the New Testament successfully completes Old Testament prophecy allows Christianity to find an independent ground in the holy book of a rival religion. The performance or occurrence of miracles does not need to play a part in the argument from prophecy. This is not to say that it claims that miracles did not occur or are not important for the narrative of the New Testament. But, miraculous events are not necessary for the argument to be successful. The argument from prophecy only requires that the events described in the New Testament are idiosyncratic enough to establish that these events in fact complete Old Testament prophecy.

Finding arguments that downplay the importance of miracles in favor of biblical prophecy was surprising to me as a philosopher brought up on Hume’s “Of Miracles.” The arguments that I found in Collins and his critics seemed to make concerns like those found in Hume seem much less important. This was particularly surprising given that Collins and his critics were writing only 25 years before Hume published the first edition of the *Enquiry*. Looking at the response of Hume’s early critics further deepened this puzzle because they also did not seem interested in the earlier arguments of Collins and his critics. This suggests that there was a historical shift between Collins and Hume.

An example of blindness to this shift on the part of even the most prominent scholars in the field can be found in J. C. A. Gaskin’s discussion of Hume’s views on religion in the second edition of *The Cambridge companion to Hume*:

In traditional (and particularly eighteenth-century) religious apologetic, the reasons for belief in God usually took the form of appeals to arguments and revelation. The

appeal to revelation was [. . .] specifically to the particular revelation of Christianity as set out in the New Testament. This, it was supposed, carried with it certain guarantees of its own authenticity. These guarantees were that the revelation fulfilled prophecy and was attended with miracles. Miracles could be brought about only by God (and not any god, but only by the one true God). Therefore a rational man had *grounds* for accepting the Christian revelation as genuine. It is, of course, precisely these grounds that Hume set out to undermine in Section 10 of the first *Enquiry*, where incidentally, he treats fulfilled prophecy as a species of miracle (EHU 10.41).¹³

One thing that my work shows, that Gaskin seems to miss, is that it was not a foregone conclusion that miracles could only be brought about by God. The possibility that the devil or other created beings would perform miracles was underwritten by Deuteronomy 13:1-4 in the Old Testament and Matthew 24:24 in the New Testament. These passages suggested a need to be able to establish that miraculous events were in fact divine. This concern was a central preoccupation of the debate at this time. I show that trying to establish the divinity of miracles lead first to what I call the “circularity problem.” In chapter one I argue that while attempting to respond to the “circularity problem” Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle were subject to a further problem. I call this the “establishment problem.” In chapter two, I argue that William Fleetwood and Benjamin Hoadly were in part trying to avoid the establishment problem when they argue that only God can be responsible for miracles (Fleetwood), or that because of their power, we will always know the miracles that God is responsible for (Hoadly).

A second thing I show, is that what Gaskin identifies as the New Testament’s “guarantees of its own authenticity” led to a problem that I call the “self-reference” problem. How can the claim of a book of revelation to be the genuine word of God be justified by appeal to the occurrence of miracles recorded nowhere else than in that very book? The “self-reference” problem is discussed in chapter two. This problem, at least in part, lead thinkers to turn to the completion of Old Testament prophecy to ground Christianity. (As mentioned, the supposition here is that the Old Testament is the scripture of a rival religion, so the

¹³ J. C. A. Gaskin. “Hume on Religion,” *The Cambridge companion to Hume* 2nd ed., (ed.) David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 485-486.

fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy by New Testament events cannot so readily be dismissed as a forgery.)

In addition, I show that thirdly, treating prophecy as a species of miracle was not the only, or even the preferred option during at least the first half of the eighteenth-century. Some prophecies are nothing more than predictions. There need be nothing particularly miraculous about the event predicted. (It might be predicted that the Messiah will wear a red shirt.) And if the event predicted is not predicted to occur in the auditor's lifetime, or at any specific time (e.g. "the Messiah will come" [unspecified when]) it can be hard to say whether the prophecy has been or will be fulfilled, let alone whether there is anything miraculous about its being fulfilled. Such prophecies are not made to serve as a sign of the prophet's supernatural power. They have some other purpose, intrinsic to the prophecy itself, such as laying out a set of features by which the Messiah shall be distinguished, should the Messiah appear. To do their job the features need only be sufficient to individuate the true Messiah from all imposters. Whether considered individually or in combination there need be nothing any more miraculous about them than there is in the combination of features that serve to individuate Julius Caesar.

There have been a number of previous surveys of the philosophical issues underlying discussions of miracles and revealed religion in eighteenth-century England.¹⁴ Many of them are article length and present their historical narrative very quickly in an effort to provide a broad overview of the development of arguments across the century. Works of this kind often mention Collins's name but do not go into detail about his contribution to the debate.¹⁵

¹⁴ These include: John Earman. *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; B. A. Gerrish. "Natural and Revealed Religion," in (ed.) Knud Haakonssen, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, 2006, 641-665; M. A. Stewart. "Hume's historical view of miracles," *Hume and Hume's Connexions*. (ed.) Stewart, M. A., and John P. Wright, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994.; M. A. Stewart. "Revealed Religion: The British Debate," in (ed.) Knud Haakonssen, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, 2006, 683-709.

¹⁵ Gerrish, "Natural and revealed religion," 652 for example mention Collins with Woolston in one paragraph. Stewart, "Revealed religion: British Debate," 689-690 is the longest treatment. It devotes a page and a half.

One book-length treatment of this issue that I found very helpful is R.M. Burns's *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*.¹⁶ Burns attempts to place Hume's argument in "Of Miracles" in its historical context "at the tail end of a flagging debate."¹⁷ Burns suggests that Hume is usually credited with more originality than is warranted.¹⁸ He ultimately argues that Hume's argument fails because, although it is a valid application of his epistemological principles, its basic premises are nonetheless inadequate.¹⁹ Although his book offers many valuable insights, Burns clusters arguments together thematically, rather than organizing them chronologically and so presents a somewhat anachronistic understanding of their development. Because Burns is only interested in arguments about miracles he often misses the effect that the larger debate about revealed religion has on these arguments. Perhaps following from this last point, Burns never mentions any of Collins's work, although he cites a number of books written in response to Collins's *Grounds and Reasons*.

I argue that Collins's work had a significant impact on the development of the historical debate of revealed religion. In order to do this I first show that during the first third of the eighteenth-century, arguments that use miracles as a way to ground the truth of Christianity reached a crisis point. This crisis came about, in part, as a response to epistemological problems that arose because of a need to be able to find a non-circular way to establish if the source of a miracle was divine or demonic. I call these problems the "circularity problem" and the "establishment problem." Attempts to avoid these problems led to a further problem that I call the "self-reference problem." In addition, concerns about using miracles as a ground for Christianity were furthered by discoveries in the new science that made descriptions of the laws of nature more precise, and following from this, miracle stories harder to establish. In response to this crisis, I show that philosophers began abandoning arguments that used miracles in favor of arguments that instead used the completion of

¹⁶ R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*. Lewisburg Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1981.

¹⁷ Burns, *Great Debate*, 9-10

¹⁸ Burns, *Great Debate*, 9-10. Earman comes to a similar conclusion although Burns's tone is much more positive than Earman who seems to be openly hostile.

¹⁹ Burns, *Great Debate*, 176

biblical prophecy as a ground for the truth of Christianity. I argue that, in large part because of Collins work, this alternative option for grounding Christianity was found to be unsuitable. I show that Collins's arguments had an immediate impact on thinkers like Samuel Clarke, Thomas Woolston, and Thomas Sherlock and argue that Collins's arguments also played an important role in clearing the way for the Hume's "Of Miracles."

In the first chapter I show that in his *Discourse on Miracles*, Robert Boyle was interested in attempting to determine whether a miracle is divine or demonic. He did this by considering the nature of the message that the miracle is intended to bear witness to. Burns identifies this as the "principle of context." One problem with turning to a solution that involves context is that it appears circular. To determine whether a message is a revelation from God we ask the person delivering the message to perform a miracle. To determine whether the miracle was performed by God rather than the devil, we ask that the revealed message be consistent with the word of God. But the only way we have of knowing the word of God is by appeal to revealed messages. I call this the "circularity problem." I show that Boyle was aware of this circularity. He responded by arguing that we can use the principles of natural reason and natural religion as an independent ground to ensure that a revealed message is divine. I argue that Boyle's analysis is subject to an "establishment problem." There could be a variety of systems of revealed religion that are each consistent with natural reason and religion. So, no one in particular can be entailed by natural reason and religion. This raises the problem of how to establish which contender is the true religion. Assuming that the one to appear first must be the true religion (why would God have waited or allowed his message to be scooped by a rival?) is not a comfortable option for champions of a later religion, like Christianity. Other options raise their own problems.

In the second part of this chapter, I show that, like Boyle, Hobbes was also concerned with trying to determine whether the source of a miracle is divine or demonic. Like Boyle, Hobbes turned to context and had to confront the circularity problem. I show that Hobbes had a different solution than Boyle and that his solution changes between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*. In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes attempted to evade the circularity problem by appealing to the trustworthiness of church ministers going back to the first apostles as an independent support for revelation. I argue that this solution ultimately runs into its own version of the establishment problem (who did the first ministers find to be trustworthy

authorities?). In the third part of this chapter I chart the development of Hobbes's view on these issues as they appear in *Leviathan*. I show that in *Leviathan*, Hobbes used the authority of the sovereign as an independent ground for the authority of the Holy Scripture. I argue that this ground is also subject to the establishment problem.

In the second chapter I consider the work of John Locke. I begin by considering a note at the end of Locke's *A Discourse of Miracles*. This note references works by William Fleetwood and Benjamin Hoadly and mentions Locke's distaste for their definition of "miracle." I consider these works by Fleetwood and Hoadly in order to improve our understanding of Locke's *Discourse*. Fleetwood and Hoadly offered rival attempts to evade the circularity and establishment problems. I argue that Fleetwood's arguments in particular fail because of a more immediately question-begging version of the circularity problem that I call the "self-reference problem." This is a problem that only a few years later Collins and others were to seize on.

Locke reacted to these rival attempts in *A Discourse of Miracles*. There, Locke presented a subjective definition of miracles. This definition makes the miraculous quality of an event depend on what the spectator considers incomprehensible and unnatural. This opens the door to the possibility that what is a miracle for one person might not be for another person. This disrupts both Fleetwood's and Hoadly's arguments.

For Locke, given this definition, there is no objective criterion that can be invoked to decide whether an event is a miracle. If we choose to believe an event is a miracle, *and we are right*, the event will always in fact be a miracle caused by God. But there is no telling whether this belief is well-grounded. This leaves room in Locke's account for someone to not accept any event as miraculous. It also allows him to explain examples of disbelief (e.g., among the Jews or among atheists). Because Locke's definition of a miracle turns on what people believe, it can be fleshed out by a considering his account of the causes of belief in general. In the second part of this chapter I consider Locke's epistemology in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Here I show why it is that for Locke we can only ever *believe* that a miracle has occurred and that God is its cause. I further argue for this conclusion by considering some of Locke's unpublished writings. These moves by Locke further degrade the use of miracles as a suitable ground for the truth of Christianity.

By the early eighteenth century, British thought about these matters had reached a crisis point where thinkers had begun to abandon the argument from miracles in favor of another foundation for revealed religion. This was the argument from the fulfillment, by the New Testament message, of prophecies found in the Old Testament—the argument from prophecy. This method for grounding Christianity avoided a number of the problems with the argument from miracles. The heyday of this alternative form of apologetics was, however, short-lived. This was in large part because of the critical work of Anthony Collins. In the third chapter I examine this episode in the history of the debate. I first consider the origins of Collins’s approach to the critical study of Revelation in his early *Essay concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions, The Evidence whereof depends upon Human Testimony*. I then consider his only thinly veiled attack on the argument from the fulfillment of prophecy. I conclude by highlighting the consequences of this argument for the subsequent history of the debate over the foundations of Christianity.

I conclude this introduction with the two Bible passages that are mentioned many times throughout this project. These are Deuteronomy 13:1-4 and Matthew 24:23-25.²⁰ These passages are concerned with the possibility of false prophets vouching for their revealed message by using miracles. Every thinker that I consider here mentions these passages somewhere in their work. In many ways the interpretation of these passages is at the center of the eighteenth-century English debate about revealed religion.

Deuteronomy 13:1-4

(1) If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, **(2)** and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” **(3)** you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. **(4)** It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.

²⁰ These come from the NIV version of the Bible

Matthew 24:23-25

(23) At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. **(24)** For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. **(25)** See, I have told you ahead of time.

Chapter 1

1 Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes on Establishing if a Miracle is Divine or Demonic

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I use Robert Boyle's *Discourse on Miracles* to draw out a number of important points that are helpful for making sense of arguments for revealed religion in seventeenth and eighteenth century England. In the second part I consider Thomas Hobbes's account of revealed religion in *The Elements of Law*. Then, in the third part I compare this to his account in *Leviathan*. I show that Boyle and Hobbes are concerned to establish if the source of a miraculous event is divine or demonic while avoiding what I call the "circularity problem." This concern comes about because of a need to respond to passages in the Bible that suggest that false prophets will use miracles to try to establish their message. I argue that in all cases Boyle and Hobbes solution to the circularity problem is subject to a further problem that I call the "establishment problem."

Turning to Boyle, I begin by drawing out what has been called "the principle of context."²¹ This "principle" is the suggestion that we can discover information about the source of a miracle by considering details about the context that the miracle takes place in or about the inspired message that a miracle is bearing witness to. As it turns out, arguments that involve context are subject to a circularity problem. This problem arises when the context that is being used to verify the source of a miracle is the doctrine that the miracle is bearing witness to. This leaves the doctrine verifying the miracle and the miracle verifying the doctrine. Boyle was aware of this objection but argued that the doctrine can be independently verified by natural reason. I argue that Boyle's solution is subject to an establishment problem.

²¹Burns, "The Great Debate," 47-51.

After presenting Boyle's account, I move backward in time to Thomas Hobbes's *The Elements of Law*.²² In *The Elements*, Hobbes developed a distinction between natural knowledge and supernatural knowledge. I begin by presenting Hobbes's account of spirit. This account is important because of a spirit's function in the process of inspiration, and because it is a good example of how Hobbes grounds natural and supernatural knowledge. Natural knowledge, it will turn out, is grounded in sensation and conception, while supernatural knowledge is grounded in the Holy Scripture. As with Boyle, I show that when trying to establish a ground for inspiration, Hobbes is confronted with the problem of identifying the source of a miracle. To try to solve this problem, Hobbes used an argument that involves context. For Hobbes, the context is the Holy Scripture. This raises the circularity problem discussed in connection with Boyle. I show how Hobbes confronts this problem while trying to establish how we can know that the Holy Scripture has the authority of the word of God. The independent criterion that Hobbes used to try to ground his argument from context is faith in the fathers of the church and the apostolic succession. I argue that this solution fails, again because of the establishment problem.

In the third part of this chapter, I consider Hobbes's account of revealed religion in *Leviathan*. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes divided up the logical space differently than in *The Elements of Law*. Rather than distinguish between natural and supernatural knowledge, in *Leviathan* Hobbes distinguished between the natural and prophetic kingdom of God. This distinction does not quite map onto the earlier distinction between natural and supernatural knowledge. The natural kingdom of God includes the things that we can know about God following from natural reason, while the prophetic kingdom includes what follows from the message of prophets. Hobbes considered the natural kingdom of God to include things like how we should honor and worship God given what we know about him following from our reason. When we turn to the prophetic kingdom we are not

²²I am ignoring the temporal order between Boyle and Hobbes because the discussion in Boyle helps bring out fundamental issues that Hobbes is also dealing with. I chose to start with Boyle because he deals with these issues in a direct and illuminating way and I am not developing a thesis that involves the development between the two.

supposed to, “renounce our Senses, and Experience; nor . . . our naturall Reason.”²³ Hobbes then gave an account of how we should interact with a revealed message when it appears to be contrary to reason. This process involves our understanding becoming “captivated” and leads to acceptance following from obedience. Hobbes considers how God speaks to people and what it takes to believe someone when they say that God has spoken to them. This leads back to arguments involving context. As I showed concerning *The Elements of Law*, for Hobbes, the authority of the Holy Scripture supports his argument from context. In *Leviathan* however, Hobbes changes the question from “How it is that we can know that the Holy Scripture has the authority of the word of God?” to “By what authority is the Holy Scripture made law?” The answer to this new question turns out to be the authority of the sovereign. This leads to a distinctly Hobbesian account of revealed religion. But, as distinctly Hobbesian as it may be, I argue that the view is still subject to the establishment problem. It appears that one solution to the establishment problem is to hold that only God can perform miracles. There is some reason to read Hobbes this way in *Leviathan*. Although this helps ease the establishment problem, it creates a new problem that is discussed at length in chapter two.

1.1 Robert Boyle’s *Discourse on Miracles*

In his *Discourse on Miracles*, Robert Boyle presented an account of miracles that attempts to identify the source of a miracle by considering the nature of the message that the miracle is intended to bear witness to. The need to distinguish a miracle’s source comes about because at various places in the Bible (most notably Deuteronomy 13: 1-5 and Matthew 24:24) people are warned about the possibility of false prophets performing miracles in order to test people’s faith. Given this possibility, the performance of a miracle alone is not enough to verify that a prophet’s message comes from God.

²³ All of the text cited from *Leviathan* comes from, Thomas Hobbes. *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan*, (ed.) Noel Malcolm, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2014. I cite this edition as “HW” followed by a page number. I also cite two other popular editions of *Leviathan*. These include: Thomas Hobbes. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. III, (ed.) William Molesworth, London: John Bohn, 1839. Cited as “CW” followed by a page number; and Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan: with selected variants*, (ed.) Edwin Curley, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994. Cited as “Curley” followed by chapter and paragraph number. The citation for this quotation is: HW 576; CW 359; Curley xxxii.2.

Verifying a miracle by appeal to details about the doctrine that it is intended to bear witness to has been described as making appeal to a “principle of context” by R. M. Burns.²⁴ In *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*, Burns claims that this principle is “central to the entire issue of belief in miracles” at this time.²⁵ Context can include details about the life of the person presenting the doctrine that a miracle is bearing witness to, or details about the content of this doctrine, or both. Considering context is a process. There are steps that have to be worked through. Reason is involved. The experience of the miracle alone is not enough to compel belief. But, using reason, it is possible to determine when a miracle is authentic and when it isn’t.

Boyle began his *Discourse* by considering an objection to this view: determining a miracle’s source based on the message it is intended to bear witness to, and the whole project of determining if a miracle has occurred in the right context, “in effect make[s] the Argument drawne from Miracles, insignificant or useless.”²⁶ If you need to consider the message that a miracle is intended to bear witness to in order to verify the source of the miracle, then the doctrine the miracle is supposed to prove to be the word of god is already presupposed, making it unnecessary to invoke a miracle in its support. In addition, there shouldn’t be the opportunity to decide if a miracle is divine. A miracle is an event that is so marvelous that it must be of divine origin regardless of the context that it takes place in. So, there should never be any need to consider context, and a miracle alone should be enough to convince us that a prophet’s message comes from God.

²⁴ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 47-51.

²⁵ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 49-50.

²⁶ Boyle Manuscripts, Royal Society, London, vol. 7, fols. 120-123. Boyle’s *Discourse on Miracles* is in the unpublished Boyle manuscripts housed at the Royal Society. Most of Boyle’s unpublished writings on miracles are published in R. L. Colie, “Spinoza in England 1665-1730,” *Proceeding of the American Philosophical Society*, 107, 1963, 183-219. The *Discourse on Miracles* is on page 218-219 in Appendix VII. It is improperly labeled as “Boyle Papers, vol. 3” rather than vol. 7, as is noted in Robert Boyle. *The Works of Robert Boyle*, (ed.) Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, Pickering & Chatto: London, 2000, 360. Burns also provides a transcription of much of Boyle’s *Discourse*, but I have chosen to use Colie’s because it appears to involve less interpretation. I cite volume number and folio number separated by a colon. For example: vol. 7: f. 122. I follow this with the page number from Colie’s article. Here the citation is: vol. 7: f. 120; Colie, 218.

The rest of Boyle's *Discourse* is spent developing his response to this objection. He began by raising a problem for his interlocutor's view. This is a problem that gives rise to the need for context, and is an issue that comes up again and again in early modern accounts of revealed religion. It explains why we need to be concerned about the source of a miracle and gives the reason for considering a miracle's context:

I answer, that in regard divers (for I say not all) of those supernatural things that are wont to be accounted Miracles, may proceed from two extreemly differing Causes, namely God & the Divil, it is necessary to consider the nature of the Doctrines for which Miracles are vouch'd, that we may not pierniciously mistake Diabolical workes for Divine Miracles.²⁷

The reason the performance of a miracle is not enough alone to bear witness to a doctrine is because it is supposed that there are other, less beneficent powers capable of causing events fully as marvelous as any performed by God. For Boyle, it is possible for the devil to perform miracles. The principle of context is proposed as a solution to this problem. Considering the content of the message that a particular miracle is supposed to bear witness to provides a way to be able to decide if the source of the miracle, and the prophet's message, are divine or diabolical. Presumably, the devil will not seek to advance divine projects by performing miracles to underwrite messages that are known to have divine approval.

It will turn out that this is a persistent problem. One might think that if we believe that only God can be the source of a miracle (as Hobbes suggested in *Leviathan*) this problem would go away.²⁸ However, because the problem ultimately comes from the need to make biblical interpretation consistent with whatever view is presented, making God the lone source of miracles only creates a new problem. If only God can perform miracles then this means that God is the source of the miracles that are intended to test our faith. I will show in the next chapter that a version of this problem was presented by William

²⁷ Vol. 7: f. 120; Colie, 218.

²⁸ HW 688; 432; Curley xxxvii.9.

Fleetwood, who proposed to get around it by stipulating that the miracles that test our faith are not *real* miracles but instead only wondrous acts. This possibility, however, can be difficult to reconcile with the text of the Bible and it poses a similar problem of verification. Any real miracle will come from God, but that leaves the question of how to differentiate between a divine miracle and a non-divine wonder.

It has been charged that the suggestion to consider context makes Boyle's argument circular.²⁹ On the surface it seems that, according to Boyle, a miracle is supposed to support and verify the proposed doctrine, but then we are supposed to look at characteristics of the doctrine to support and verify the miracle.³⁰ Boyle was aware that his view might appear open to this objection. However, he showed that this concern is grounded in a mistake about the view.

But tho till I be duely satisfied that the Miracles themselves are Divine and not Diabolical, I must in reason refrain from acknowledgeing them: yet I pretend not to judge which of these two the Miracle is by the Articles of any particular instituted Religion, as the Christian, the Jewish, or the Mahometan; because that Religion it selfe must be proved, by miracles to have been divinely instituted. But for this examination I take only the general *Principles of Natural Reason & Religion*, which teaching me antecedently to all particular Revelations, That *there is a G[od]*, That *he is*, & can be, *but One*; That *[he] is Just, Wise, Good, Gracious &c;* and Tha[t] *he has the Care and Government of Humane Affairs*; if a *supernatural* Effect be wrought to authorize a Doctrine that plainly contradicts these Truths, I cannot judge such a Miracle to be *divine*, and therefore am not bound to suffer my selfe to be swayed by it.³¹

Rather than judge if a miracle comes from God based on the articles of any particular religion (particularly articles where the miracle is itself taken to prove to be the revealed

²⁹ Burns discusses this problem at, Burns, *The Great Debate*, 51-57.

³⁰ Richard Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958, 83-90 argues this. Burns, *Great Debate*, 51-57 argues that it is a mistake.

³¹ Vol. 7: f. 121; Colie, 218.

word of God), we must consider whether the message the miracle is offered to authenticate is consistent with “general *Principles of Natural Reason & Religion*.” If the proposed doctrine that is being vouched for by a miracle contradicts any of these principles we have good reason to suspect that it is not divine.

Boyle’s response to the charge of circularity implies that any appeal to doctrine to verify that a miracle comes from God, must be to doctrines that have been independently established. When a miracle purports to authenticate the divine origin of some new or further message, the content of that message must at least contain nothing that is inconsistent with more general principles that have already been established about the divine nature and divine intentions. The independent principles Boyle was interested in are established by “*Natural Reason*” and contained in the “natural religion” Boyle took natural reason to establish.

Boyle’s case shows that philosophers were aware of the problem of circularity and were attempting to avoid it. But it does not show that they were having much success at that enterprise. As so far considered, Boyle’s attempt is obviously flawed. One can’t get more from less. Starting off with a reliance on natural reason gives us principles of natural religion, which need no miracles to be authenticated. Adding any more detail to these principles requires revelation, otherwise natural religion would already have incorporated them. Knowing that a revealed doctrine comes from God requires miracles. Knowing that the miracles are truly divine requires an appeal to context. But the miracles need to establish that the additional content of the revelation comes from God, and context can do no more than tell us that there is consistency of the revealed message with natural religion, not that there is entailment. When rival religions appeal to rival miracles to establish rival revelations that are equally consistent with natural religion, but incompatible with one another, an appeal to context cannot tell us which is the true revelation.

I later show that Hobbes dealt with this problem by appealing to authority rather than natural reason. In both *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan* he asked how it is that we can know that the Holy Scripture is the word of God. Just as Boyle used the dictates of

natural reason, so Hobbes used a discussion about authority in order to find something independent of the Holy Scripture that can be used to ground its authority.

I said earlier that Boyle considered appeals to context to be a process that involves working through various steps. Boyle presented that process as follows.

Thus I first assent to a Natural Religion upon the score of Natural Reason antecedently to any particular Revelation. And *then*; if a Miracle be wrought to attest a particular Doctrine concerning Religion, I endeavour, according to the Principles of Natural Religion & right Reason to discover whether or no this proposd Doctrine be such, that I ought to looke upon a Miracle that is vouch'd for it, as comeing from God or not. And *lastly* if I find by the Agreeableness of it to the best notions that Natural Theology gives us of God & his Attributes, that this Religion cannot in reason be doubted to come from him; I then judge the Body of the Religion to be true.³²

Here each step in the process is made explicit. The first step is to assent to a “natural” form of religion that follows from natural reason. According to Boyle’s system we assent to this first, before we consider any particular revelation. Then, if we are in a situation where a miracle bears witness to a doctrine that is presented by a prophet, we use natural reason to decide if this doctrine is the type of thing that that God would verify with a miracle. To do this, we need to make sure that it is consistent with the dictates of natural reason. If it is, the final step is to accept the outcome of this process. If after considering the doctrine there is nothing that leads us to doubt the content we then, “judge the Body of the Religion to be true.”

Boyle qualified this whole discussion by claiming that this process only applies when a religion is trying to become established. Once a religion is established a new criterion follows from our natural knowledge of God’s attributes.

³² Vol. 7: f. 121-122; Collie 219.

For when a Religion has been once solidly established by a competent number of true & uncontrold Miracles, then I have a new Criterion to judge of a subsequent Miracle by; for the veracity of God being founded upon his Justice & Goodness (three Attributes knowable to us by the Light of Natural Reason) it is not to be suppos'd that he would contradict himself, and so reveal his will to mankind, as inevitably to lead them into inextricable difficulties concerning it. . .³³

This new criterion is consistency with previously established doctrine. Since we can know by natural reason that God is just and good, we know that he is also truthful. We can suppose from this that God isn't going to contradict himself and make his will more difficult to understand. So, once a doctrine is established we can use this established doctrine to verify other proposed examples of revelation. Boyle used this shift in the criteria to interpret the Bible in a way that further reduces the importance of miracles and strengthens the importance of considering established doctrine. In the example of Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers who perform competing miracles, what is important is not the power of signs and wonders, all of which can come from a source that is not divine. Instead what matters is that the message delivered by Moses is consistent with the doctrine that was previously established.

Of course this silently passes over the fact that the “doctrine that was previously established” is a doctrine that was private to the Jewish nation. Notwithstanding that the Jewish scriptures made claims about a revealed tradition stretching back to the first created humans, we now know that those claims were only written down (or fabricated) in post-Mosaic times, and even Boyle will have believed that the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses and so have no greater antiquity. The Egyptians will have had their own religious doctrines, which we now know to have been of far greater antiquity. Nor would it do for Boyle to dismiss the Egyptian religions as contrary to natural religion, because they might be interpreted polytheistically and so are in conflict with natural religion. The question concerns the possibility of rival revealed religions that are all consistent with natural religion but inconsistent with one another (e.g., a tradition

³³ Vol. 7: f. 122-123; Collie 219.

that insists on a limited salvation of the elect, versus a second tradition that insists that salvation depends on works, versus a third tradition that insists that they will be redeemed in the end). On Boyle's account, it ends up being merely good luck that one revealed religion is the first one and so is in a position to claim to be the original body of revealed doctrine to which all subsequent revelations must conform. A further difficulty is the very real possibility that what is historically the first revealed religion to be consistent with natural religion may be suppressed or entirely lost due to national conquests.

(Zoroastrianism might be instanced.) At a minimum, Boyle's doctrine would need to be supported with some doctrine to the effect that God, being good, would not have permitted the true revelation to be scooped by an earlier, false revelation (false because it is not God's intended message, though it is equally consistent with natural religion), or would not have permitted the champions of a false religion to triumph militarily over those of the true. But such doctrines are difficult for a Christian to defend, not only in light of the historical record, but also in light of scriptural evidence accepted by Christians themselves to the effect that God will sometimes punish or try the faithful by allowing their rivals to triumph militarily over them. This makes the true religion one that might only be known at the end of time.

This treatment of Boyle's *Discourse on Miracles* has made four main points. The first is that for Boyle, and in fact for many early modern philosophers, establishing that a miracle took place is not enough to know that the miracle came from God, or that we should accept the doctrine that the miracle was intended to authenticate. There is the possibility that the miracle didn't come from God. Given this possibility, we should expect to see philosophers trying to find the best way to determine the cause of the miracle. As I have shown, Boyle's solution involves considering the doctrine that the miracle purports to authenticate. Although Boyle was only interested in considering the doctrine, others expand on this context to include the life of the person who is delivering the message.³⁴ Although the performance of a miracle is certainly a part of the process that allows us to arrive at the conclusion that a doctrine is divine, because we have to be

³⁴ See for example, Joseph Glanville, *Sadducismus Triumphantus*, London, 1689, 101.

careful of its source, it is important to consider other details apart from simply whether or not a miracle took place.

Another point to glean from Boyle's *Discourse on Miracles* is that arguments that use context are subject to problems of circularity. If we are going to consider the doctrine that a miracle purports to support in order to determine whether that miracle comes from God, we need some way of determining divine doctrine independently of appeal to the very message that the miracle purports to support. Boyle's case shows that philosophers were aware of this problem and that they were interested in developing accounts that avoided it. It also presents an example of one way this problem was addressed. While Boyle's response to the problem may not have been without its own problems we should be careful about simply rejecting arguments from miracles as circular. Not every philosopher's account was as sophisticated or as clearly articulated as Boyle's, but the fact that he was aware of circularity problem suggests that others were aware of it and tried to avoid it in their own way. Rather than simply dismiss appeals to miracles as circular it is worth considering the possibility that any account that uses context might have the resources to resist circularity and to try to figure out how it can.

The third point brought up by a study of Boyle's analysis is closely related to the second. This is that the criteria used to verify the divine origin of a doctrine can change once a religion is established. On Boyle's view, before a religion is established it is important to rely on natural reason to verify the content of a doctrine. However, once a religion is established, this creates an additional criterion. This is consistency with previously established doctrine. If a religion that is trying to become established appeals only to consistency with its own doctrine this is circular. Once a religion is established the process used to verify new revelations can appear to be circular, but this is only an appearance resulting from ignoring the fact that it has already established some of its doctrines using the dictates of natural reason as independent criteria. This provides a reason to be careful before dismissing an account as circular. It is important to ask if the proposed religion is established and if its verification criteria have changed. This of course requires the philosopher to have the resources to defend the thesis that such changes in criteria can take place. For Boyle, their possibility is justified by natural

reason—because God is just and good he is also truthful, which means that once he has established his word he is not going to try to confuse us. Later messages can therefore be judged by the new criterion of their consistency with earlier messages.

Finally, while the circularity is evaded, new problems arise. As noted earlier, the principles of natural religion are consistent with a variety of inconsistent revealed doctrines (e.g., limited salvation of the elect, salvation of the just, eventual salvation of all). Natural religion does not entail any one of these doctrines. If it did, they would be part of natural religion and would not need to be revealed. If, at the “establishment” stage, a revealed doctrine (say it is limited salvation of the elect) is to be accepted simply because it is consistent with natural religion, though not entailed by it, and this gets it established and makes it a criterion against which any later revelation is judged, then there is a possibility that the earliest revealed religion to be preached will be established simply because it is the earliest, at which point it has no established rivals with which it can be inconsistent. That need not make it the one with divine sanction (perhaps God intends eventual salvation of all). But, being the earliest, it would be the one to be first established, and so would constitute the criterion against which the others are judged false. Boyle might try to get around this unwelcome implication by insisting that a good and truthful God would not allow his message to be scooped in this way, just as he would not allow it to be confused or contradicted, but that might conflict in an ugly way with history, which could prove that the Christian (or Jewish, or, for that matter, Calvinist or Origenist) revelation is not in fact the oldest one. Alternatively, Boyle might maintain that even if false revelations antedate the true one, God will ensure that the true one triumphs in the end. This is tantamount to taking the choice between competing revelations to be made by the sword. That would be to give up hostages to the other end of history, making the true religion the one to triumph in the end — an end that has not yet come. It is, moreover to give up on the criterion of consistency with established doctrine in favor of a rather more dismal alternative: that a truthful God will not allow his message to be confused and contradicted *forever* (he might for a time to punish or try the faithful), but will *eventually* grant it *military* victory over its opponents. This is a position that can only give heart to all innovators in religion and throw all rational criteria for the assessment of revelation into question. The English Civil War, which was among other

things a war between those believing in a limited salvation of the elect and those believing in justification by works, is a case in point. The Puritans and the Royalists took up arms to decide which is the true religion. Except God's verdict in one generation appears to have been different from his verdict in the next and who knows what it will be some years from now. These are consequences that could only have dismayed Boyle, but it is not clear how his account could have avoided them.

These points make an entry for considering Hobbes earlier line of argument for a rather more authoritarian position on the justification for revealed religion. Hobbes, like Boyle, recognized the need to identify the source of a miracle that is used to support proposed revelation. In addition, he used context as a solution to this problem. However, Hobbes turned to a different independent criterion, authority, to avoid the problem of circularity. It was, however, no more successful than Boyle's.

1.2 Hobbes's account of revealed religion in *The Elements of Law*

Hobbes's *The Elements of Law* grounds the distinction between natural and revealed religion on a distinction between natural knowledge and supernatural knowledge. "Supernatural knowledge" is a misnomer because things that we "know" supernaturally turn out to only be beliefs, based on our faith in others. This is contrasted with natural knowledge, which is knowledge in the true sense of the term, for Hobbes.

Most of Hobbes's account of religion in *The Elements of Law* is in chapter eleven, "What Imaginations and Passions Men Have, at the Names of Things Supernatural." In only twelve paragraphs Hobbes covered a surprising range of related issues. These include: 1) a cosmological argument for the existence of God, 2) why it is that we give God the attributes that we do, 3) what we understand by the word "spirit," 4) an argument for why—on our natural understanding—spirit has to be corporeal, and 5) a discussion of the mistake the heathens make that has led them to believe in incorporeal demons and ghosts. I begin by presenting Hobbes discussion of the signification of the word "spirit." This discussion is helpful because, in order to understand the relationship between spirits and inspiration for Hobbes, it is important to know how he understood spirit. It also

provides a good example of the process that Hobbes used to divide natural knowledge from supernatural knowledge as well as how he wanted to ground each of these types of knowledge.

1.2.1 Spirit and inspiration in *Elements of Law*

Hobbes began his analysis of the signification of the word “spirit” by considering what the characteristics of a spirit would be if it were as a natural thing. When we use the word “spirit,” to refer to a natural thing we understand a body that is so subtle that it doesn’t affect our senses. Nonetheless, this body “fillet up the place which the image of a visible body might fill up.”³⁵ So, our conception of a spirit as a natural thing consists of a figure without color. When we use the word “figure” however, we understand something with dimensions. So, our natural conception of spirit involves something that has dimension. All of this is fine when talking about our natural understanding of spirit. However, we also speak of “spirits supernatural,” meaning something without dimension. The problem here is that this leaves us with two understandings of the word “spirit” that “flatly contradict one another.”³⁶ This would be fine. We could simply reject the expression as a confused jumble of words and pass on. But a problem is posed by the fact that God is described as a supernatural spirit, and this description is taken to have some meaning and truth. Hobbes continued:

And therefore when we attribute the name of spirit unto God, we attribute it, not as a name of anything we conceive, no more than when we ascribe unto him sense and understanding; but as a signification of our reverence, who desire to abstract from him all corporeal grossness.³⁷

³⁵ Here I cite the text from Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, (ed.) J. C. A. Gaskin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. I cite this as chapter followed by paragraph number. I also provide the citation for Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and politic*, reprint of the 1889 edition by F. Tönnies with a new Introduction by M. M. Goldsmith, London: Frank Cass, 1969. I cite Tönnies edition using page number. This citation is: xi.4; Tönnies 55.

³⁶ xi.4; Tönnies 55.

³⁷ xi.4; Tönnies 55.

Hobbes was able to reconcile our application of the word “spirit” to God by taking our use of this word to be performative rather than descriptive. It serves as a signification of our reverence rather than assigning any characteristics to him.³⁸ However, when we consider spirits other than God this option is not available. These spirits present us with a different problem. It turns out that it is not possible, using only natural means, to “come to knowledge” of spirits at all. As Hobbes put it:

We who are Christians acknowledge that there be angels good and evil; and that they are spirits, and that the soul of man is a spirit; and that these sprits are immortal. But, to know it, that is to say, to have natural evidence of the same: it is impossible.³⁹

Hobbes’s epistemology provides further justification for this suggestion. He maintained that we can only have knowledge of something if we have a conception of it. Although we can reason with our “lips only,” i.e., merely by stringing words together in accord with logical or deductive principles, and this type of reasoning may lead us to true conclusions, these truths will never be evident to us because when the words do not arouse any conceptions, they are meaningless to us.⁴⁰ If our reasoning isn’t related to things in the world in the right way, even if the reasoning is right, it won’t “connect back” to the world. The link that “connects us back” to the world is what Hobbes called “evidence.” Hobbes claimed that all conception comes from sense experience.⁴¹ Given these earlier claims, there is no way, using only natural means, to have knowledge of supernatural spirit because in order for this type of knowledge to be evident we need something from the world that can help form the evidence for our reasoning. This

³⁸ Lodi Nauta “Hobbes on Religion and the Church between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*: A Dramatic Change of Direction?,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 63, No. 4, Oct. 2002, 581-583 interprets this passage somewhat differently.

³⁹ xi.5; Tönnies 55.

⁴⁰ vi.3; Tönnies 25.

⁴¹ In iii.1; Tönnies 8, Hobbes used the image of ripples being formed on water by a stone or the wind to explain that conceptions stay in our minds after we experience something. He then identified this conception, which is obscured through this process as “phantasy” or “imagination.” He spent the rest of the chapter expanding on how he understood imagination.

requires a conception and conceptions only come from sense experience. So, we can't conceive a supernatural spirit because we can't experience a supernatural spirit, and so we can't have evidence of a supernatural spirit, or natural knowledge of it.

Although we can't have natural knowledge of supernatural spirit, Hobbes went on to suggest that we can at least attach some meaning to the word "spirit" when it is taken to refer to an invisible being that occupies some spatial dimension. This is legitimate because, as Hobbes noted, the word "incorporeal" is not in the bible. When the bible talks about spirit:

[I]t is said of the spirit, that it abideth in men; sometimes that it dwelleth in them, sometimes that it cometh on them, that it descendeth, and cometh and goeth; and that spirits are angels, that is to say messengers: all which words do consignify locality; and locality is dimension; and whatsoever hath dimension, is body, be it never so subtile.⁴²

We have no immediate reason to deny that spirits are corporeal. The Bible refers to spirit in many places, and in all of them the term is used in such a way as to suggest locality. So, Hobbes concluded that in the Bible, the word "spirit" should probably be understood as implying corporality.

This discussion of spirit provides a good example of how Hobbes distinguished claims for natural as opposed to supernatural knowledge. Claims of natural knowledge follow from sensation and things that we can reason about, while our supernatural understanding follows directly from our understanding of the Bible. In the case at hand, the claim that spirits are corporeal is an instance of supernatural knowledge, based on Biblical exegesis rather than any direct experience or reasoning therefrom.

In addition, because Hobbes went on to define inspiration as the "operation of spirits in us" it is noteworthy that he considered these spirits to be corporeal. Hobbes version of the principle of context arises in the context of his discussion of inspiration. Like Boyle, for

⁴² xi.5; Tönnies 55-56.

Hobbes, the appeal to context follows from a concern about establishing the source of a prophet's proposed inspiration. Given this appeal to context, we should expect a problem of circularity to arise. It does, and Hobbes had a different response to this problem than Boyle.

1.2.2 Hobbes's commitment to context

Hobbes's account of inspiration draws on the themes that have just been examined.

And seeing the knowledge we have of spirits, is not natural knowledge, but faith from supernatural revelation, given to the holy writers of Scripture; it followeth that of inspiration also, which is the operation of spirits in us, the knowledge we have must all proceed from Scripture.⁴³

Inspiration is "the operation of spirits in us," so because we can't have natural knowledge of spirits, we can't have natural knowledge of their operations. As with spirit, our knowledge of the source of inspiration requires a reference to Scripture. Hobbes continued:

The signs there set down of inspiration, are miracles, when they be great, and manifestly above the power of men to do by imposture. As for example: the inspiration of Elias was known by the miraculous burning of his sacrifice.⁴⁴

In the story of Elias "fire from the Lord" lit his sacrificial pyre, in spite of it being covered with water.⁴⁵ This miraculous event functioned as a sign for those watching that Elias's message came from God. However, as was the case with Boyle, it turns out that although a miraculous event is a necessary condition to show that a prophet's message comes from God, it is not sufficient. There is more that needs to be considered than simply the performance of a miracle. And, as with Boyle, part of the reason for this is

⁴³ xi.7; Tönnies 56-57.

⁴⁴ xi.7; Tönnies 57.

⁴⁵ The phrase "fire from the Lord" comes from the New International Version of the Bible 1 Kings 18: 38.

because we need to be sure about the source of the message and the miracle that is supposed to help verify it.

But the signs to distinguish whether a spirit be good or evil, are the same by which we distinguish whether a man or a tree be good or evil: namely actions and fruit. For there be lying spirits wherewith men are inspired sometimes, as well as with spirits of truth.⁴⁶

Hobbes was considering the same type of problem that I showed above in Boyle, namely, the problem of how to establish the source of a prophet's message. This is important even when the message that a prophet is delivering is supported by a miracle. Hobbes's solution was to claim that the way to distinguish a good spirit from an evil one is by its output. In the case of a man, if the actions are good, we know that the man is good. Applying this to a prophet who performs a miracle in order to support his message, what matters is the output, this is to say the message. Hobbes, like Boyle appealed to context to help establish if the source of a message is good or evil.

In further expanding on this point, Hobbes followed Boyle in reversing the onus concerning miracles.

And we are commanded in Scripture, to judge of the spirits by their doctrine, and not of the doctrine by the spirits. For miracles, our Saviour hath forbidden us to rule our faith by them, Matt. 24: 24. [. . .] Where it is plain, that we are not to judge whether the doctrine be true or no, by the angel; but whether the angel saith true or no, by the doctrine. [. . .] The knowledge therefore we have of good and evil inspiration, cometh not by vision of an angel that may teach it, nor by a miracle that may seem to confirm it; but by conformity of doctrine with this article and fundamental point of Christian faith, which also Saint Paul saith 1 Cor: 3-11, is the sole foundation: that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ xi.7; Tönnies, 57.

⁴⁷ xi.7; Tönnies 57.

The passage in the Bible that Hobbes was trying to interpret, and that creates the need for context, is the same that mentioned by Boyle: Matthew 24:24.⁴⁸ Hobbes cited a number of other Biblical passages. They all show the importance of being aware of false prophets and that a miracle alone is not enough to prove that a prophet's message comes from God.⁴⁹ We judge if a spirit is good or evil by its output. The output in this situation is inspiration, which is the operation of this spirit in us. These operations involve the delivery of some kind of message. In conformity with the principle of context, the message must conform to other, previously established messages to be acceptable. If the message conforms to the fundamental article of the Christian faith—"that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh"—then we can accept the output of this instance of inspiration. We do this rather than accept the message on the strength of a miracle alone. In the Holy Scripture, miracles are signs of inspiration. So, they are an important and necessary part of the process to confirm that an inspired message comes from God. However, a miracle alone is not enough to confirm that a prophet's message comes from God.

As with Boyle, this raises a circularity problem. But Hobbes had a different way to avoid it.

1.2.3 The Holy Scripture being the word of God and the circularity problem

Having argued that we distinguish good inspiration from bad inspiration by the conformity of the inspired message with the fundamental point of the Christian faith, acknowledged and accepted based on the authority of the Holy Scripture, Hobbes needed

⁴⁸ Nauta, "Hobbes on Religion and the Church," 585, cites this passage as an example of a connection between *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*. He suggests that the line in *Elements* about the lord forbidding us to rule our faith by miracles works toward undermining their supernatural character. My analysis provides a different reason for Hobbes to make this claim.

⁴⁹ "And Saint Paul saith, Gal. I, 8: *Though an angel from heaven preach unto you otherwise, &c. let him be accursed.*" "So likewise, I Joh. Chap. 4 vers. I: *Believe not every spirit: for false prophets are gone out into the world;* vers 2: *Hereby shall ye know the spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God;* verse 3: *And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is not of God; and this is the spirit of Antichrist;* verse 15: *Whosoever confesseth that Jesus is the Son of God, in him Dwelleth God, and he in God.*"

to explain how we know that the scripture has this authority. Some independent criteria are needed to ground the content of the Holy Scripture.

Hobbes turned to consider different possible sources for the knowledge that the Holy Scripture has the authority it needs. He began by asking if we can know that the Holy Scripture is the word of God using only natural knowledge:

And first, it is manifest: that if by knowledge we understand science infallible and natural, such as is defined in the VI chap. 4 sect., proceeding from sense; we cannot be said to know it, because it proceedeth from the conceptions engendered by sense.⁵⁰

We cannot know that the Scripture is the word of God using natural knowledge because natural knowledge requires conception, and conception follows from sensation whereas the type of knowledge that is required to know that the Holy Scripture is the word of God does not involve sensation. All that follows from our natural knowledge about God (drawn from a cosmological argument) is that he is eternal, incomprehensible, and omnipotent. None of these attributes are any help if we are trying to establish using natural knowledge that the Holy Scripture is the word of God.

Hobbes next considered supernatural knowledge, but this type of knowledge also isn't going to be able to be able to show that the Holy Scripture is the word of God.

Supernatural knowledge doesn't work because, "we cannot know it but by inspiration; and of that inspiration we cannot judge, but by the doctrine."⁵¹ Supernatural knowledge would be circular.

Hobbes passed over this very quickly, and never explicitly mentioned that he was dismissing supernatural knowledge because it is circular. However, knowing that accounts that involve context are subject to the objection of circularity, we can expect something like this to come up.

⁵⁰ xi.8; Tönnies 58.

⁵¹ xi.8; Tönnies 58.

Hobbes's solution to the circularity problem is different than Boyle's. Rather than using natural reason to generate independent criteria that can be used to try to establish that the Holy Scripture is the word of God, Hobbes appealed to faith, understood as trust in the testimony of others. This faith is faith in the holy people of the church and in a chain of apostolic succession that leads back to the time of the prophets.

It followeth therefore, that we have not any way, natural or supernatural, that knowledge thereof which can properly be called infallible science and evidence. It remaineth, that the knowledge we have that the Scriptures are the word of God, is only faith.⁵²

For Hobbes, faith consists in opinions we form based on the trust we have in other people.⁵³ In the case of the Holy Scripture the people that we trust are the holy people of God's church. According to Hobbes, these people have succeeded "one another from the time of those that saw the wondrous works of God Almighty in the flesh."⁵⁴

Hobbes's language here is not very precise. If we follow his epistemology, faith, is a type of opinion, not knowledge. Yet, Hobbes wrote that, "the knowledge we have that the Scriptures are the word of God, is only faith," seeming to say that the knowledge *is* faith. Unfortunate formulation aside, he went on to write that, "For whatsoever is evident either by natural reason, or by revelation supernatural, is not called faith. . . And, we are not said to believe, but to know those things which are evident."⁵⁵ Hobbes's claim about the Holy scripture amounts to a claim that we cannot *know* that the Holy Scripture is the Word of God; we can only *believe* it.

Hobbes was careful to insist that grounding the belief that the Holy Scripture is the word of God in the people of the church does not imply taking a stand on the hot-button

⁵² xi.8; Tönnies 58.

⁵³ vi.7; Tönnies 27.

⁵⁴ xi.9; Tönnies 59.

⁵⁵ xi.8; Tönnies 58. The full quote here is "For whatsoever is evident either by natural reason, or by revelation supernatural, is not called faith; else should not faith cease, no more than charity, when we are in heaven; which is contrary to the doctrine of Scripture."

theological issue of whether faith is a “work” that individual human beings can freely decide to perform rather than a gift dispensed by God to those predestined for salvation. Nothing he said, he claimed, means that God is not the efficient cause of faith or that “faith is begotten in man without the spirit of God.”⁵⁶ God remains the efficient cause of faith because the opinions that make up our faith “proceed from hearing, and hearing from teaching, both which are natural, yet they are the work of God.”⁵⁷ For Hobbes, all of nature comes from God and can be attributed to his spirit, and we ourselves are mechanical devices with no free will.

Although all natural things can be attributed to the spirit of God, and so our faith in God can follow from the natural process of hearing and teaching, some people have more faith than others. This is only what the large body of Puritan commons would have accepted in Hobbes’s day, since they all believed that only a limited number of “saints” have been elected for salvation by being gifted with the grace to believe and that the rest are predestined to eternal damnation. Even more moderate churchmen would not dare to question a limited election openly for fear of being branded Arminians or Catholics, both persecuted sects. Hobbes did the best he could to bring his own doctrines into line with the dogma:

The faith therefore wherewith we believe, is the work of the Spirit of God, in that sense, by which the Spirit of God giveth to one man wisdom and cunning in workmanship more than to another; and by which he effecteth also in other points pertaining to our ordinary life, that one man believeth that, which upon the same grounds another doth not; and one man reverenceth the opinion, and obeyeth the commands of his superiors, and others not.⁵⁸

God is responsible for different ways that faith becomes manifest in different people simply because the spirit of God gives different characteristics to different people. So,

⁵⁶ xi.9; Tönnies 59.

⁵⁷ xi.9; Tönnies 59.

⁵⁸ xi.9; Tönnies 59.

since people are different, events that might cause one person to behave a certain way will cause a different person to behave differently. This doesn't mean that because faith in God follows from hearing and seeing which are natural, that everyone will end up having faith. Instead, because everyone is different, "one man beleveth that, which upon the same grounds another doth not."

But, having made this much of a concession to the Puritans, Hobbes concluded this part of the discussion by casting his lot decisively with the Royalists. Because our faith that the scriptures are the word of God is based in the trust that we put in the people of the church, we should not prefer our own fancied illuminations or inspirations or interpretations of the Bible to those endorsed by a long tradition of prelates of the most outstanding qualities. Their interpretation of the Scripture must be decisive when a doubt or controversy comes up, as long as the fundamental point that Jesus Christ is the messiah is not called into question. The fathers of the church who are responsible for interpreting the scripture are part of an apostolic succession that leads back to those who saw Jesus's miracles.⁵⁹ This is one place where it seems that Hobbes's view changes between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*.

Even with an appeal to faith in the people of the church as an independent criterion, it is not clear that Hobbes managed to evade the circularity objection. For Hobbes, in order to believe that the Holy Scripture has the authority of the word of God we need to have faith, which is to say our trust needs to be put in the people whose judgment we have good reason to respect. We do this because the people are wise and of good character. But these wise and good people ultimately have no more reason for their faith than we do: their own trust in other wise and good people who preceded them and taught them. This cannot go back forever. Ultimately, we reach a point where the wise and good people in question are the people who first felt themselves inspired or who first saw the miracles. But these people were in no position to ask whether the message they felt

⁵⁹ The Catholic Church still maintains apostolic succession and in Hobbes time so did the Anglican Church. In 1896 Pope Leo XIII declared the Anglican line of succession invalid, claiming that it had been invalid since the sixteenth Century.

themselves inspired by (or saw the miracle performed to confirm) is consistent with the doctrines received and endorsed by their own wise and good predecessors, since, *ex hypothesi*, there were no predecessors. The appeal to authority fails at this point, and the whole chain of authorities is revealed a house of cards. All the same problems discussed in conjunction with Boyle's account arise here. There could be different revealed traditions each endorsed by a tradition of wise and good people. Do we choose between them on the basis of which came first or which has proven itself better able to silence its opponents by force of arms?

In addition to this problem a further issue might be raised: because it requires faith and trust, we never have knowledge that the Holy Scripture is the word of God.

The second of these problems is more tractable than the first, so consider it first. Though we can't have knowledge that scripture is the word of God, Hobbes maintained that, "Belief, which is the admitting of propositions upon trust, in many cases is no less free from doubt, than perfect and manifest knowledge."⁶⁰ In many cases we can be as certain of propositions that we admit on trust as those that we accept as knowledge. The argument that Hobbes gave for this claim is:

- (1) Everything has a cause.
- (2) So, where there is doubt there must be a cause for this doubt.
- (3) There are many things that we receive from the report of others which it is impossible to imagine any cause of doubt,
- (4) So, there must be no reason to doubt these things that we receive from the reports of others.

So in situations where it is impossible to imagine a cause of doubt in the report that we hear from someone, the belief that we form based on this report can be as free from doubt as perfect and manifest knowledge. Hobbes continues, "[F]or what can be opposed against the consent of all men, in things they can know, and have no cause to report

⁶⁰ vi.9; Tönnies 27.

otherwise than they are (such as is a great part of our histories), unless a man would say that all the world had conspired to deceive him.”⁶¹

But while this neatly addresses the second, “lack of knowledge” problem it does not do much to help with the first, “establishment” problem. The type of thing that Hobbes wanted to be able to accept on faith, as being no less free from doubt than perfect manifest knowledge, is something that we are in a position to know about. This means something that we could have knowledge of ourselves if we were in different circumstances. It also includes situations where there are multiple independent witnesses, and no one has anything to gain by lying. The example that Hobbes gives is of history. When I read a historical account of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens I can accept it as if it were perfect, manifest knowledge. This is because I could have been in a position to know—if for example I had been born ten years earlier. Then, I would remember the eruption as a ten year old. In addition, there were multiple independent witnesses and no one has anything to gain by lying. This account of faith also includes claims like “I was in Seattle yesterday and the Space Needle is still standing.” If someone says this to me, since this is something that I could know if I were in Seattle, I can accept it as if it were knowledge, assuming that I have no reason to think that the person telling me this is lying. In this case the multiple independent witnesses who have nothing to gain from lying are the people who are not saying anything. If the Space Needle wasn’t still standing it would be a major event and people would be talking about it. The fact that they are not supports my friend’s claim that the Space Needle is still standing. Hobbes doesn’t focus on the fact that both the event being testified, and the person testifying it matter in our trust, but others writing about testimony do.

But this offers no help with the case of the originally inspired writers, who put the Holy Scripture together. They needed to ask themselves if their inspirations were the work of God or the devil, and if any miracles they saw performed to attest to the supreme origin of those stories were the work of a supremely good or a supremely diabolical being. This was a question about invisible intelligent power, not amenable to resolution by sense

⁶¹ vi.9; Tönnies 27.

experience. And there was, as of yet, no scriptural tradition, endorsed by generations of good and wise people, with which their inspirations could be consistent. Hobbes's appeal to apostolic succession is of no help here. Although I, as a person who has faith that the Holy Scripture is the word of God, am not in a position to know the things that I need to in order verify that the Holy Scripture is the word of God, it turns out that the people that I am putting my trust in are in no better position. At best, they can, like me, pass the problem on to their predecessors by choosing to trust them. But this bottoms out eventually.

Hobbes was in the end not so much concerned to establish a foundation for revealed religion as to combat the violent "enthusiasm" of the Puritans, by giving reasons to question whether one has individually been inspired and for taking all true claims to inspiration to be ones that can be integrated with established Church authority. His position on the foundations of revelation works well enough in that immediate pragmatic context. It serves as a reason to silence innovators. But it is not ultimately defensible as an account of the foundations of revealed religion.

1.3 Hobbes's account of revealed religion in *Leviathan*

In *The Elements of Law* the discussion of religion is isolated to a few key chapters. In *Leviathan*, it is expanded to fill over half of the Book. Interpreting Hobbes on these issues is extraordinarily difficult. As one commentator put it, "Hobbes's 'theology' is situated in a complex frame of relationships to the other 'elements' of his philosophy—not only to politics, but also to the doctrine of science (logic) and physics. Consequently, its appraisal depends on the way these relationships are understood (or ignored)."⁶² In addition to trying to situate Hobbes's theology within his broader philosophical system, it is a monumental task to situate it in *Leviathan*. This is in part because Hobbes developed various parts of his account in a wide variety of different contexts. With inspiration for example, he first discussed misunderstandings as they relate to his account of imagination (Chapter II), absurd assertions (Chapter V), and madness (Chapter VIII), all before

⁶² Agostino Lupoli, "Hobbes and Religion Without Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, (ed.) A.P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 454.

identifying false inspiration as something that tends to weaken a commonwealth (Chapter XXIX). This is all before he gives a positive account of inspiration in chapters XXXII, XXXIII, XXXIV, and XXXVI. In spite of this complexity, there is much to learn by following Hobbes's arguments throughout *Leviathan*.

The interpretation offered here focuses on the relationship between Hobbes's arguments for revealed religion and political sovereignty. I argue that Hobbes changed his view in *Leviathan* to make the Sovereign, rather than the ecclesiastics, the ultimate authority in scriptural matters. This leaves us with a distinctly Hobbesian account of revealed religion.

There is an ongoing debate about how best to understand the relationship between Hobbes's early political works, *The Elements of Law* and *De Cive*, and the later work, *Leviathan*. Some argue for a fundamental change between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*.⁶³ Others admit that although there is certainly a lot of new material in *Leviathan*, and that some of Hobbes's positions have changed, there is still a general continuity between the works.⁶⁴ More recent scholarship has focused on Hobbes's idiosyncratic composition process as a cause of interpretive problems. This view suggests that Hobbes wrote by slotting newly written material into a pre-existing framework without always being sensitive to how the new material and existing arguments fit together. Given this, "*Leviathan* stands in need of a 'textual archeology' that traces its 'layers of sedimentation' in the development of chapters and arguments from the *Elements* through *De Cive* to the masterpiece."⁶⁵ Following the development of Hobbes's

⁶³ Those who argue for a fundamental change include Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.; and David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

⁶⁴ Those who argue for continuity include Gaskin, *Elements of Law*, xi-xlii; Nauta "Hobbes on Religion and the Church," 577-598.; Lodi Nauta "Hobbes the Pessimist? Continuity in Hobbes's Views on Reason and Eloquence between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 10, 2002, 31-54.

⁶⁵ Deborah Baumgold, "The Composition of Hobbes's *The Elements of Law*, *History of Political Thought*, vol. xxv, No. 1, 2004, 36.; See also Deborah Baumgold. "The Difficulties of Hobbes Interpretation," *Political Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 6, December 2008, 827-855.

arguments across his works might then provide a record of what he commits himself to at different points, allowing us to occasionally disregard what appear to be inconsistencies.

Among those who argue for a fundamental change in Hobbes's thought between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan* is Richard Tuck.⁶⁶ Tuck's view is that in *The Elements of Law* and *De Cive*, Hobbes's religious arguments were decidedly Anglican. However, in the late 1640s while in France, Hobbes radically changed his view about the church and this led him to conclude that the sovereign should be the sole interpreter of scripture. Hobbes became interested in relieving people's fear, and *Leviathan* should be read as presenting a utopian theory for society.⁶⁷ In response to Tuck, Lodi Nauta argues that there is instead "a development and extension of a line of thinking which is already clearly visible in the earlier works."⁶⁸ Nauta argues that we can find the beginning of Hobbes's views on religion in discussions of the nature and fate of the soul; the character of magic, prophecy, and revelation; and church and state relations that are already present in *Elements of Law* and only developed and extended in *Leviathan*. In addition, Nauta encourages us to resist wanting to form a tight link between Hobbes's theological thinking and his views of church-state relations in order to avoid trying to "blend all the elements of Hobbes's development into one story."⁶⁹

Although I identify a change in Hobbes's view between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*, I do not think this change is fundamental. Instead, I think of this change as a development of Hobbes's thought. Given that in *The Elements of Law* Hobbes was just starting to develop his view about the authority of the sovereign, he grounded the authority of the Holy Scripture just where we should expect—in the apostolic succession.

⁶⁶ Tuck argues for this conclusion in a variety of different places including in his introduction to *Leviathan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press 1991, xxxviii-xxxix.; Richard Tuck. *Hobbes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.; Richard Tuck. "The 'Christian Atheism' of Thomas Hobbes" in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, (eds.) Michael Hunter and David Wootton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 111-130.; Richard Tuck. "The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes" in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, (eds.) N. Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, Cambridge, NJ: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 120-138; and Richard Tuck. "Warrender's *De Cive*," *Political Studies*, 33, 1985, 308-315.

⁶⁷ Tuck, *Leviathan*, xliii.

⁶⁸ Nauta, "Hobbes on Religion and the Church," 594.

⁶⁹ Nauta, "Hobbes on Religion and the Church," 598.

However, by the time he wrote *Leviathan*, he better understood the power of his arguments about the sovereign and was in a position to ground all authority there—even the authority of the Holy Scripture.

1.3.1 God's twofold kingdom: Natural and Prophetic

The primary distinction that Hobbes made when he gave his account of revealed religion in *The Elements of Law* was between natural knowledge and supernatural knowledge. In *Leviathan* however, he made a different set of distinctions. These distinctions follow from the three ways that God makes his law known to people. Hobbes calls these the “threefold word of God.” The threefold word of God leads to what Hobbes called the twofold kingdom of God.⁷⁰ These two kingdoms are the “natural” and “prophetic.” We might initially guess that the natural kingdom of God in *Leviathan* would correspond to natural knowledge in *The Elements of Law*. This is not how it ends up working out however. In *Leviathan*, the natural kingdom of God is restricted to natural knowledge we have of God, and does not include our natural knowledge of other things. Some of what is in the natural kingdom of God in *Leviathan* is also discussed in *The Elements of Law*. But there is much more detail and nuance to the discussion in *Leviathan*.

Hobbes began by presenting a tension that arises between the Sovereign and God. People owe the Sovereign “simple Obedience, in all things, wherein their obedience is not repugnant to the Lawes of God.”⁷¹ But, in order for this to work, it is important for it to be known what the laws of God are. Otherwise people might offend God because of too much obedience to the sovereign, or disobey the Sovereign because of a fear of offending God. “To avoyd both these Rocks, it is necessary to know what are the Lawes Divine.”⁷²

The first step in this process involves identifying who God's subjects are. They are those who believe that God exists and who believe that God has some interest in them. The later is as important as the former. Having established who God's subjects are, the next

⁷⁰ Lupoli discusses the threefold distinction at Lupoli, “Hobbes and Religion Without Theology,” 467.

⁷¹ HW 554; CW 343; Curley xxxi.1.

⁷² HW 554; CW 343; Curley xxxi.1.

step is to know how God makes his laws known. The only way that humans have to make their laws known is through using their voice. This is to say that humans have to proclaim a law and then make sure that this proclamation is widely enough known that other people are not ignorant of it. The idea here is that Humans are limited to words. They can be either written or spoken but this is the only way that they can make their laws known.

God, on the other hand has a number of ways to make his laws known. This sets up what Hobbes calls the “threefold word of God.”

But God declareth his Lawes three wayes; by the Dictates of *Naturall Reason*, by *Revelation*, and by the *Voyce* of some *man*, to whom by the operation of Miracles, he procureth credit with the rest. From hence there ariseth a triple Word of God, *Rational*, *Sensible*, and *Prophetique*: to which Correspondeth a triple Hearing; *Right Reason*, *Sense Supernaturall*, and *Faith*. As for Sense Supernaturall, which consisteth in Revelation, or Inspiration, there have not been any Universall Lawes so given, because God speaketh not in that manner, but to particular persons, and to divers men divers things.⁷³

When a law is discovered using natural reason, we are considered to “hear” the rational word of God through right reason. In revelation the sensible word of God is “heard” through an irresistible inward feeling of the truth of something, which is therefore considered to be a revelation granted by God. God also can declare a law using the voice of a person whom God supports by performing a miracle. This is an example of the prophetic word of God. This word is “heard” through faith. For Hobbes revelation is a personal experience. When God speaks to someone, he only speaks to one person at a time. Because of this, there are no universal laws that govern revelation, or the sensible word of God. Removing revelation leaves us with a twofold kingdom of God.

From the difference between the other two kinds of Gods Word, *Rationall*, and *Prophetique*, there may be attributed to God, a twofold Kingdome, *Naturall*, and

⁷³ HW 556; CW 345; Curley xxxi.3.

Prophetique: Naturall, wherein he governeth as many of Mankind as acknowledge his Providence, by the naturall Dictates of Right Reason; And Prophetique, wherein having chosen out one peculiar Nation (the Jewes) for his Subjects, he governed them, and none but them, not onely by naturall Reason, but by Positive Lawes, which he gave them by the mouths of his holy Prophets.⁷⁴

When considering the natural kingdom of God Hobbes pointed out that the right that God has over people doesn't come from that fact that God created them. It instead follows from his omnipotence.⁷⁵ In contrast, the right of the sovereign comes from an agreement between people to give their authority to the sovereign. In the state of nature any person has the right to have power over anyone else. The fact that *any* person can have the right to have power over anyone else is an important part of what creates the deplorable conditions that drive people to commonly consent to give one person sovereign authority. If, in the state of nature, there had been one person with irresistible power, this person would have been the ruler without needing any consent. "To those therefore whose Power is irresistible, the dominion of all men adhereth naturally by their excellence of Power; and consequently it is from that Power, that the Kingdom over men, and the Right of afflicting men at his pleasure, belongeth Naturally to God Almighty; not as Creator, and Gracious; but as Omnipotent."⁷⁶ Similarly, pain, suffering, and affliction also follow from God's omnipotence rather than from sin. This claim allows Hobbes to make sense of the story of Job. Job's pain and suffering didn't follow from his sin but from God's power. Here Hobbes references God appealing to his power when saying to Job, "*Where wast thou when I layd the foundations of the earth?*" (Job 38:4).⁷⁷

Natural reason dictates the laws concerning natural duties of one person to another. Hobbes provided the natural demonstration for these laws in chapters fourteen and fifteen of *Leviathan*. They include equity, justice, mercy, humility, and the rest of the moral

⁷⁴ HW 556; CW 345; Curley xxxi.4.

⁷⁵ HW 558; CW 345; Curley xxxi.5.

⁷⁶ HW 558; CW 346; Curley xxxi.5.

⁷⁷ HW 560; CW 347; Curley xxxi.6.

virtues.⁷⁸ This leaves the duties that follow from the dictates of natural reason relating to the honor and worship of the divine sovereign. Hobbes defined honor and worship by writing that to honor God is to “think as Highly of his Power and Goodnesse, as is possible.” Worship is the external signs of honor that appear in words or actions.⁷⁹ In order to know how to worship God correctly, it is important to know what we should worship naturally versus what is simply an arbitrary sign of worship. This distinction matters because while arbitrary signs of worship will change depending on the institutions of customs of a society, those things that we worship naturally should not change.

In order to establish what would be fitting examples of natural worship, Hobbes starts by considering a cosmological argument for the existence of God. This argument is similar to the argument from *The Elements of Law*. It concludes that God is eternal, omnipotent, and incomprehensible. Hobbes next goes through a number of characteristics that are often wrongly ascribed to God. These include characteristics like that God is the soul of the world, or that God is finite, or that we can attribute a figure to God. Because these characteristics do not follow correctly from our natural reason they do not qualify for natural worship. If we attribute to God only what correctly follows from natural reason we end up having to do one of two things. We either have to use negative attributes such as “infinite,” “eternal,” and “incomprehensible,” or we have to use superlatives such as “most high,” or “most great.” These fitting examples of natural worship of God are not meant to declare what God *is* but instead how much we admire God, and how ready we are to obey and honor him. It is important not to misunderstand Hobbes here as presenting a type of “negative theology.” This is to misunderstand his point. The reason to be careful not to claim that phrases we use when worshiping God actually apply to God is because this would be to claim that we could actually conceive of God. This is not acceptable because everything that we can conceive is finite, and following from natural reason, God is not finite.

⁷⁸ HW 560; CW 347-348; Curley xxxi.7.

⁷⁹ HW 560-562; CW 348-349; Curley xxxi.8.

1.3.2 Of A Christian Commonwealth

In addition to what we can know about God by natural reason, there are things we can know that are based on the prophetic word of God.

The change between the discussion of the natural and the prophetic kingdom of God is physically represented in *Leviathan* by the division between book II and III. Book II ends with the account of the natural kingdom of God while book III involves an analysis of the prophetic kingdom. Hobbes “derived the rights of sovereign power, and the duty of subjects”⁸⁰ using only the principles of natural reason. However, because in a Christian commonwealth there are things that depend not only on natural reason but also supernatural revelation, it is necessary to also consider the prophetic word of God. This is the topic of “the Nature and Rights of a CHRISTIAN COMMON-WEALTH.”⁸¹

Even when considering the prophetic word of God we are not supposed to “renounce our Senses, and Experience; nor . . . our naturall Reason.”⁸² Sense, experience, and natural reason are “the talents which [God] hath put into our hands to negotiate, till the coming again of our blessed Saviour; and therefore not to be folded up in the Napkin of an Implicite Faith, but employed in the purchase of Justice, Peace, and true Religion.”⁸³ This is an allusion to the parable of the talents, which appears in both the Gospel of Matthew (25:14-30) and Luke (19:11-26). Our modern definition of the word “talent” as a natural aptitude or skill comes from the figurative Biblical use in Matthew. Hobbes’s reference to a napkin follows from Luke, and suggests that he is referencing both parables at the same time. The idea is that it is important that we use sense, experience, and natural reason to “purchase” justice, peace, and true religion. This is consistent with Hobbes’s overall claim that that justice and peace follow from natural reason. In addition, if Hobbes’s use here is keeping with the parable, this is not a one-for-one trade but rather an investment that pays back much more than what was invested. By using our sense, experience, and

⁸⁰ HW 576; CW 359; Curley xxxii.1.

⁸¹ HW 576; CW 359; Curley xxxii.1.

⁸² HW 576; CW 359; Curley xxxii.2.

⁸³ HW 576; CW 359-360; Curley xxxii.2.

natural reason we receive in return much more than we initially invested in the form of justice, peace, and true religion. This also means, if we follow the lesson of the parable, that to not use our senses, experience, and natural reason will lead to punishment.

Following natural reason is what leads us out of the state of nature, and not following it is what leads us back to the state of nature. This punishment seems to almost be what is alluded to in the last line of the parable, “And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁸⁴

Consistently with this position, Hobbes wrote that, “though there be many things in Gods Word above Reason; that is to say, which cannot by naturall reason be either demonstrated, or confuted; yet there is nothing contrary to it; but when it seemeth so, the fault is either in our unskilfull Interpretation, or erroneous Ratiocination.”⁸⁵ The notion of what is “above reason” also shows up in Locke.⁸⁶ Hobbes’s usage seems to suggest that there is nothing *in fact* contrary to natural reason in God’s word. There are only things that seem to be contrary to natural reason because of a fault in reasoning or interpretation.⁸⁷ (There are also things that are not entailed by natural reason, though they are consistent with it.) Although this may seem like a Lockean assertion, it is not. It instead is bound up with a quite contrary notion in Hobbes, that of “captivation.” This is a foreign notion that needs to be considered in some detail.

A proposition that is contrary to reason “triggers” captivation in our minds. According to Hobbes, “when any thing therein written [in God’s word] is too hard for our examination, wee are bidden to captivate our understanding to the Words; and not to labour in sifting out a Philosophicall truth by Logick, of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of naturall science.”⁸⁸ Hobbes was very far, here, from a Lockean view of revelation as being merely beyond what reason is able to determine.

⁸⁴ NIV, Matthew 25:30.

⁸⁵ HW 576; CW 360; Curley xxxii.2.

⁸⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (ed.) Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011. Cited “E” followed by book, chapter, paragraph: E IV.xvii.23.

⁸⁷ Lupoli, “Hobbes and Religion Without Theology,” 468 discusses above reason in Hobbes.

⁸⁸ HW 578; CW 360; Curley xxxii.3.

Captivation isn't "a submission of the intellectual faculty to the opinion of any other man." Instead it is "the Will to Obedience, where obedience is due."⁸⁹ For Hobbes we actually can't submit our intellectual faculty to others' opinions. "For Sense, Memory, Understanding, Reason, and Opinion are not in our power to change; but alwaies, and necessarily such, as the things we see, hear, and consider suggest unto us; and therefore are not effects of our Will, but our Will of them."⁹⁰ This follows from Hobbes's deterministic worldview in which memory, understanding, reason, and opinion are the natural consequences of the things that we see and hear, and so are beyond our control. We captivate our understanding when we bear or endure contradiction and obediently follow what we are commanded based on faith in the person with authority who is commanding us.⁹¹ We do this even though "the mind be incapable of any notion at all from the words spoken." Because our will follows from our memory, understanding, and reason, when these faculties are forced to confront a contradiction our will would normally be forced into a state of inaction. Lack of understanding produces indecision over how to act. However, in the case of the word of God, when our minds become captivated, we are supposed to "option off" to obedience.⁹²

This discussion of the captivation of our understanding leads into a discussion of how God speaks to people and what is required to know that God has spoken to someone. When God speaks to a person, he either speaks to her directly or by mediation of another person who he has spoken to directly. What exactly this process involves, and what the experience is like, is easy for someone who God has spoken to to understand. "How God speaketh to a man immediately, may be understood by those well enough, to whom he hath so spoken."⁹³ But, for another person who is being told by that person that God has spoke to them, it is "hard if not impossible" to know for sure that God has spoken to this

⁸⁹ HW 578; CW 360; Curley xxxii.4.

⁹⁰ HW 578; CW 360; Curley xxxii.4.

⁹¹ HW 578; CW 360; Curley xxxii.4.

⁹² Lupoli, "Hobbes and Religion Without Theology," 468 gives his account of the captivation of our understanding.

⁹³ HW 578; CW 361; Curley xxxii.5.

person.⁹⁴ Hobbes goes on to point out that if someone claims that God has spoken to them, but I'm not so sure that I agree that they are right, there really are no arguments they could give that would convince me that God has spoken to them. Of course, if this person is my sovereign I am required to obey them and act as if I believe. However, even if this person is my sovereign they cannot compel me to believe privately against my own reason.⁹⁵

Hobbes's claim that it is "hard if not impossible" for other people to know that God has spoken to someone is strengthened at xxxvi.40, which claims simply that it is impossible for other people to know that God has spoken to someone else directly. Nonetheless, Hobbes went on to say that the Sovereign can oblige us to obedience on this issue. Since belief cannot be compelled, and impossible belief certainly cannot be compelled, this would amount to obliging us to an outward show of conformity, or "obedience." The sovereign's power to compel our obedience follows from her authority. If a person without that authority tried to "pretend the same, there is nothing that exacteth either beleeffe, or obedience."⁹⁶

Hobbes buttressed his position with a survey of different means that people might employ to establish that God has spoken to them. Some people might claim to have been divinely inspired while reading the Bible. But if you are going to say that God has spoken to you thorough the scripture this does not mean that he has spoken to you immediately, but only in the way that he speaks to other Christians. Alternatively, saying that God spoke to you in a dream is not very convincing, because this is just to say that you had a dream that God spoke to you. Similarly, saying that God came to you in a vision is also not very convincing, because visions come about when a person is in the strange state between being awake and asleep, which is a state in which current sensory experiences tend to be assimilated with past recollections and fancies to produce fantastic images. This makes it uncertain whether God really appeared or whether the vision was just the sort of fantastic

⁹⁴ HW 578; CW 361; Curley xxxii.5.

⁹⁵ HW 580; CW 361-362; Curley xxxii.6.

⁹⁶ HW 578; CW 361; Curley xxxii.5.

vision that would ordinarily appear in these circumstances. It is the same with other ways. “So that though God Almighty can speak to a man, by dreams, visions, voice, and inspiration; yet he obliges no man to believe he hath so done to him that pretends it; who (being a man) may erre, and (which is more) may lie.”⁹⁷

This raises a problem. How can we know who has been truly inspired by God? Hobbes pointed out that this is a complicated matter, referencing 1 Kings 22, where out of 400 people who claimed to be prophets, Micaiah was the only real prophet. It is in this connection that Hobbes considered the principle of context. According to Hobbes, there are “two marks, by which together, not asunder, a true Prophet is to be known.”⁹⁸ The first is the performance of a miracle, while the second is teaching the established religion. Like Boyle, Hobbes worked through both Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and Matthew 24:24 to point out why miracles alone are not enough to prove that a person was inspired by God. While responding to Deuteronomy 13 Hobbes made his point particularly clear:

In which words two things are to be observed; First, that God wil not have miracles alone serve for arguments, to approve the Prophets calling; but (as it is in the third verse) for an experiment of the constancy of our adherence to himself. For the works of the *Egyptian* Sorcerers, though not so great as those of *Moses*, yet were great miracles. Secondly, that how great soever the miracle be, yet if it tend to stir up revolt against the King, or him that governeth by the Kings authority, he that doth such miracle, is not to be considered otherwise than as sent to make triall of their allegiance.⁹⁹

As in both Boyle, and *The Elements of Law*, the performance of a miracle alone is not enough to “approve the prophet’s calling” because, as the verse in Deuteronomy claims, God may allow miracles to be performed by false prophets in order to test our faith. However, for the Hobbes of *Leviathan* the further test of conformity to established

⁹⁷ HW 580; CW 362; Curley xxxii.6.

⁹⁸ HW 582; CW 362; Curley xxxii.7.

⁹⁹ HW 582; CW 363; Curley xxxii.7.

doctrine is not grounded in considerations of natural reason or precedents set by a God who will not allow his message to be contradicted or confused. Established doctrine is established by the Sovereign and it is accepted because to do otherwise would be to revolt against the king.

Hobbes further observed that “as miracles without preaching that doctrine which God hath established, so preaching the true doctrine without the doing of miracles is an insufficient argument of immediate revelation.” Here Hobbes cited Deuteronomy 18:21-22 which says that if a prophet speaks without being able to predict a future event, then the prophet “*has spoken it out of pride of his own heart.*”¹⁰⁰ We might imagine a situation in which a person claims to be a prophet and then prophesies an event that is so far in the future that it will not occur in the prophet’s lifetime. Hobbes ruled this out by claiming that the miracles that, “oblige us to beleeve a Prophet, ought to be confirmed by an immediate, or a not long deferr’d event.”¹⁰¹

Hobbes also appealed to the widely shared the opinion that, since the time of the Gospel, miracles have ceased.

Seeing therefore Miracles now cease, we have no sign left, whereby to acknowledge the pretended Revelations, or Inspirations of any private man; nor obligation to give ear to any Doctrine, farther than it is conformable to the Holy Scriptures, which since the time of our Saviour, supply the place, and sufficiently recompense the want of all other Prophecy; and from which, by wise and learned interpretation, and carefull ratiocination, all rules and precepts necessary to the knowledge of our duty both to God and man, without Enthusiasme, or supernaturall Inspiration, may easily be deduced.¹⁰²

The claim that miracles have ceased since the time of the Gospel might seem like an invention to combat the Catholics, who believe that the occurrence of miracles is an

¹⁰⁰ HW 584; CW 364; Curley xxxii.8.

¹⁰¹ HW 584; CW 365; Curley xxxii.8.

¹⁰² HW 584; CW 365; Curley xxxii.9.

important part of their religion.¹⁰³ However, this claim follows from the system that Hobbes has set up. The purpose of God speaking to the prophets, was to establish the claim that Jesus Christ is the messiah. The process, in part required miracles. Since this goal was accomplished there is no need for God to speak to people directly anymore. So, given this, there is no need for miracles because there is no need to verify that a revealed message comes from God.

Hobbes used the claim that miracles have ceased to argue that we can immediately reject any current claims to divine revelation. In addition, he claimed that “all rules and precepts necessary to the knowledge of our duty both to God and man” can easily be deduced from the Holy Scripture “by wise and learned interpretation and careful ratiocination.” It is tempting to think that this wise and learned interpretation is open to anyone. This is not the case however. We are not supposed to try to use philosophical logic to work through religious mysteries. “For it is with the mysteries of our religion, as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole, have the vertue to cure; but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect.”¹⁰⁴ Hobbes vested the authority to interpret the scripture in the hands of the sovereign.

1.3.3 The Authority of the Holy Scriptures

In *The Elements of Law*, the issue of the authority of the Holy Scripture arises in connection with the process of trying to verify whether a person claiming to be inspired actually is so. Our knowledge of inspiration, because it isn't natural knowledge, has to follow in accord with principles laid down in the Holy Scripture. In the Holy Scripture, the signs of inspiration are miracles, but we need to verify that these miracles come from God and make sure that the message of the prophet conforms to established doctrine. This setup led Hobbes to consider how we can know that the scripture has this authority—the authority of the word of God. This authority can't come from natural knowledge, because there is no sensation involved. It also can't come from supernatural

¹⁰³ Lupoli, “Hobbes and Religion Without Theology,” 468 provides his account of the importance of this claim.

¹⁰⁴ HW 578; CW 360; Curley xxxii.3.

knowledge because this would be circular. It instead comes from our faith in the people of the church and their relationship to the chain of apostolic succession.

When he turned to this question in *Leviathan* Hobbes claimed that its difficulty comes from “the improperness of the words wherein the question itself is couched.”¹⁰⁵ All people believe that the “first and original *author*” of the Holy Scripture is God. So, this can’t be the disputed question.¹⁰⁶ Hobbes didn’t argue for this claim, but an argument can be constructed on his behalf. When Hobbes said “all people” he must have meant “all people” who are subjects in the kingdom of God. All of these people believe in God’s existence and his providence. They are also members of the Christian commonwealth. This makes it reasonable to think that they do all accept that God is the original author of the Holy Scripture. So, Hobbes can be granted the conclusion that this is not the question at issue.

The question also can’t be, “How can we *know* that the Holy Scripture is God’s word?” This is because the only people who can *know* that the Holy Scripture is God’s word are those who have been directly inspired by God. Everyone else just has to believe that the Holy Scripture is God’s word. This does follow in a unique way from Hobbes’s system. The second word in the threefold word of God is the sensible word of God that is “heard” through “sense supernatural.” Because this word of God consists in revelation or inspiration, and is not governed by universal laws, it makes sense that no one could *know* that the Holy Scripture is the word of God. This is for just the reason that Hobbes identified, because the only people who know are those who God interacts with directly.

However, the question also can’t be, “How can we *believe* that the Holy Scripture is God’s word?” This is because belief does not confer authority, and the ultimate question is a question about the authority by which scripture (or an interpretation of scripture) is elevated to the status of the word of God. Different people believe things for different reasons, and what is a good reason for one person carries no authority with another. This

¹⁰⁵ HW 604; CW 377; Curley xxxiii.21.

¹⁰⁶ HW 604; CW 377-378; Curley xxxiii.21.

is a point Hobbes had already made in the *Elements of Law*, when explaining why faith remains a gift of God, notwithstanding that belief is necessitated by circumstances.

The faith therefore wherewith we believe, is the work of the Spirit of God, in that sense, by which the Spirit of God giveth to one man wisdom and cunning in workmanship more than to another; and by which he effecteth also in other points pertaining to our ordinary life, that one man believeth that, which upon the same grounds another doth not; and one man reverenceth the opinion, and obeyeth the commands of his superiors, and others not.¹⁰⁷

The variability of faith is just a consequence of the way that faith works in the context of the different life experiences of different people and the different constitutions of their bodies and brains. This account persists in *Leviathan*:

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by those accidents, which guide us into the presence of them that speak to us; which accidents are all contrived by God Almighty; and yet are not supernaturall, but onely, for the great number of them that concurre to every effect, unobservable. Faith, and Sanctity, are indeed not very frequent; but yet they are not Miracles, but brought to passe by education, discipline, correction, and other naturall wayes, by which God worketh them in his elect, at such time as he thinketh fit.¹⁰⁸

Another passage from *Leviathan* reiterates the point:

Whereby it is evident, that the ordinary cause of beleeving that the Scriptures are the Word of God, is the same with the cause of the beleeving of all other Articles of our Faith, namely, the Hearing of those that are by the Law allowed and appointed to Teach us, as our Parents in their Houses, and our Pastors in the Churches: Which also is made more manifest by experience. For what other cause can there bee assigned, why in Christian Common-wealths all men either beleeve,

¹⁰⁷ xi.9; Tönnies 59.

¹⁰⁸ HW 504; CW 312; Curley xxix.8.

or at least professe the Scripture to bee the Word of God, and in other Commonwealths scarce any; but that in Christian Commonwealths they are taught it from their infancy; and in other places they are taught otherwise?¹⁰⁹

Different people believe different things from different causes. In a Christian commonwealth everyone believes that the Holy Scripture is the word of God because they have been “taught it from their infancy.” However, “in other places they are taught otherwise.” If the question about the authority of the Holy Scripture is reduced to a question about belief it will have authority in one place but not in another, which may not be a bad thing if the places are under the administration of different sovereigns, but is a bad thing insofar as the beliefs of members of the same commonwealth can be expected to vary to almost the same extent.

According to Hobbes, the question that we should be asking is, “By what authority are the Holy Scriptures made law?” He answered this question using the same strategy as in *The Elements of Law*. This is to first ask if the authority that the Scriptures are made law comes from nature, or from the supernatural. The authority can’t come from nature because although the laws of nature provide a moral doctrine that is consistent with reason and this comes from God, this authority doesn’t involve the supernatural aspects of the Holy Scripture, only the natural ones.¹¹⁰ If the authority comes from God himself then the scriptures are like written law and only apply to people who are sufficiently aware of them. This means that if God hasn’t spoken to you directly, or if you haven’t interacted with a prophet whom he has spoken to directly, then you won’t be subject to this authority. So, the only authority left that could make the Holy Scriptures law is the authority of “his, whose Commands have already the force of Laws; that is to say, by any other Authority, then that of the Commonwealth, residing in the Sovereign, who only has the Legislative power.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ HW 936; CW 589-590; Curley xliii.8.

¹¹⁰ HW 604; CW 378; Curley xxxiii.22.

¹¹¹ HW 604; CW 378; Curley xxxiii.24.

In *Leviathan*, the sovereign forms a different type of ground for the authority of the Holy Scripture than the apostolic succession did in *The Elements of Law*. Faith in the apostolic succession could be considered problematic because this means that the authority of the Holy Scripture comes from having faith in the people other than the Sovereign — people who could therefore become rivals to the Sovereign's authority, undermining the stability of the Commonwealth.

Grounding the authority of the Holy Scripture in the authority of the Sovereign to make laws keeps all authority with the sovereign. As contrary as it might seem to the established religious traditions, it seems natural that in Hobbes's system the Sovereign's authority would include the authority to make the Holy Scripture law. In addition, to ground the authority of the Holy Scripture in the sovereign is to ground it in the most independent criterion in his philosophical system. It provides a non-circular criterion for verifying established doctrine. But, as with the other systems examined, the circle is only temporarily and apparently evaded. If we recall, according to Hobbes, there are two marks to know a true prophet. The first is consistency with the established religion and the second is the performance of a miracle to establish that the proposed message is divine. However, how can we be sure that this miracle is divine? We know it if the message it is vouching for is consistent with the established religion. But, this solution is circular unless there is an independent criterion to ground this established religion. I have suggested that Hobbes's answer here is that the authority of the established religion follows from the authority of the sovereign. But, this runs into the establishment problem: the Sovereign is in no better position to know which are the inspired words of God than is anyone else. Even if they are themselves inspired, it could be by a demon. No miracle can prove otherwise because demons can also perform miracles. And no prior scripture can be invoked as an authority that must be respected because the question is precisely which prior scriptures to recognize as authorities. Unless one supposes that God is providentially disposed to ensure that the Sovereign will always be determined to believe the true message, a demonically inspired Sovereign could enforce conformity to (even if not belief in) a false religion. Whether or not God is so disposed, how could it come to pass that the Sovereigns of different nations disagree over the scriptural canon, as in fact they do? Is God punishing or trying certain nations prior to allowing the military triumph

of the nation with the true religion? But then, if it is God's will that the nation with the true religion trounce the Sovereign of the nation with the false religion, and his will that the people living under the bad Sovereign be set on trial, are they failing his trial by not themselves rising up in arms in defense of the true religion?

Rather than a problem for this view, we might instead think that this is exactly Hobbes's point. By locating the authority of the Holy Scripture in the authority of the Sovereign this ensures that the independent criterion that establishes the authority of the Holy Scripture is the command of the Sovereign. In addition, because Hobbes has presented a system where what matters for the Sovereign's authority is the outward or public display of religious duties rather than inward belief, we don't as individuals have to believe what follows from the Sovereign's authority, we just have to act as if we do. So, the establishment problem, rather than a problem is just a consequence of the view.

However, Hobbes's view is still subject to the establishment problem. This can be shown by considering the view as a solution to the crisis of Hobbes's own time. This crisis was a dispute internal to Christianity over how God is to be worshiped and how his messages are to be understood. The Puritans who were challenging the King's authority believed in direct revelation, while those loyal to the King preferred a model where authority followed from the Holy Scripture. Given this, the model that Hobbes is arguing for, of a religious doctrine established on the authority of the Holy Scripture, and in this case the authority of the Sovereign, is exactly what the Puritans of Hobbes's time were rejecting. Hobbes's answer to this crisis is to invoke the authority of the Sovereign to establish the particular religious doctrines of the kingdom and to make this authority what grounded these doctrines' truth. This is in fact a solution, but it does little to relieve the concerns brought up by the establishment problem in this particular case. Presumably the Puritans found themselves in exactly the situation that the establishment problem brings up. They were under the rule of a bad Sovereign and God was putting them on trial. They would fail this trial if they did not raise arms in defense of the true religion.

It may seem like one way out of this problem is if only God can cause miracles. On this view, we would no longer have to worry if the source of a miracle was divine or demonic

because every miracle is necessarily divine. This eases the tension of the establishment problem. The establishment problem comes about because the independent criteria used to establish when a miracle is divine can successfully underwrite multiple competing versions of Christianity. Given this, there is no way to know which view should be favored. However, if only God can perform miracles this avoids the need to establish the divinity of a miracle.

There is some question about how to read Hobbes on this point. In chapter XXXII he says, “For the works of the *Egyptian* Sorcerers, though not so great as those of Moses, yet were great miracles.”¹¹² This suggests that created beings other than God can perform miracles. However, later in *Leviathan* he claims, “no Devil, Angel, or other created Spirit, can do a Miracle.”¹¹³ He then goes on to argue that only God can cause miracles. The view that only God can perform miracles as a response to the establishment problem is at the center of the next chapter.

Here we see Hobbes moving the debate forward in an attempt to avoid the problems brought about by Deuteronomy and Matthew. As I show in the next chapter however, while considering the work of William Fleetwood and Benjamin Hoadly, this only changes the problem. It does not make it go away. If only God can cause miracles there is still the problem brought up by the false profits in the passages from Deuteronomy and Mathew. The new problem is that we will still need to figure out how we can know the difference between a true miracle and what we might think of as a non-divine wonder.

1.4 Conclusion

One model for how a revealed message can be verified as in fact coming from God involves the occurrence of a miraculous event. This event is supposed to verify the divinity of the revealed message. On this model, a prophet first claims to have a message from God. This prophet is able to verify the divinity of this message through the

¹¹² HW 582; CW 363; Curley xxxii.7.

¹¹³ HW 688; CW 432; Curley xxxvii.9

occurrence of a miracle. In this chapter I showed that in the last half of the 17th century thinkers were struggling with a problem with this model that comes from two parallel passages in the Old and the New Testament: Deuteronomy 13:1-4 and Matthew 24:24. These passages warn the reader about the possibility of a false prophet performing a miracle to verify a message that is not divine. Because of this, the performance of a miracle alone is not enough to verify the divinity of a revealed message. In response to this problem I showed that Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes were trying to respond to the issues raised by Deuteronomy and Matthew while avoiding circularity. I argued that they did this by appealing to independent criterion to ground the use of the Holy Scripture in their arguments. In every case however, this solution is subject to what I call the “establishment problem.” The need to respond to the problems brought up by Deuteronomy and Matthew, and the establishment problem that these responses are subject to, highlight some of the weaknesses of the argument from miracles. These weaknesses will eventually lead to a crisis.

In *A Discourse on Miracles*, Robert Boyle attempted to identify if the source of a miracle was divine or demonic by considering the nature of the message that the miracle was intended to bear witness to. One problem with this solution is that it may appear circular. I showed that Boyle was aware of this objection and that he suggested that we should use the principles of natural reason and natural religion as an independent ground to ensure that a revealed message is divine. I concluded this section by drawing out four main points from Boyle’s analysis including the establishment problem. This problem comes about because a wide variety of possible systems of revealed religion are consistent with natural reason and religion but none in particular are entailed by natural reason and religion. Given this there is no way to establish which religion is the true religion.

I showed that like Boyle, Hobbes was also concerned with trying to establish if the source of a miracle was divine or demonic. This also led Hobbes to confront the circularity problem. I showed that Hobbes had a different solution however and that this solution changed between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*. In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes attempted to ground the divinity of miracles in the authority of the Holy Scripture independently supported by the apostolic succession. I argue that this solution ultimately

runs into its own version of the establishment problem. In the third part of this chapter I chart the development of Hobbes's views on these issues as they appear in *Leviathan*. I show that in *Leviathan*, Hobbes developed the authority of the sovereign as an independent ground for the authority of the Holy Scripture. I argued that this ground is also subject to the establishment problem. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that it is possible to read Hobbes as claiming that only God can perform miracles. This seems like it might ease the tension of the establishment problem. However, it only causes a new problem that is considered in depth in chapter two.

Chapter 2

2 John Locke's Subjective Definition of Miracles as a Response to William Fleetwood and Benjamin Hoadly

I begin this chapter by considering a note at the end of John Locke's *A Discourse of Miracles* that explains his inspiration for writing that work. In this note Locke mentioned having read William Fleetwood's *An Essay upon Miracles*, and an anonymous letter responding to this essay that we now know was written by Benjamin Hoadly. Locke's main concern seems to have been the way that each author defined a miracle. Although a number of commentators mention Locke's note, very few consider Fleetwood's essay, and no one I have found considers Hoadly's letter. I show that there is much to be learned about Locke's account in *A Discourse of Miracles* by considering exactly what he was responding to.

I first consider Fleetwood's *An Essay upon Miracles* and then Hoadly's response, *A Letter to Mr. Fleetwood Occasion'd by his late Essay on Miracles*. In his essay, Fleetwood argues that only God can perform miracles. It follows that no true miracle has ever vouched for a doctrine that is contrary to God's word. The actions of the false prophets mentioned in the Bible are merely "wonders" rather than true miracles. Fleetwood also rejected any distinction between greater and lesser miracles, and any suggestion that the number or the "greatness" of miracles might be used to tell which of competing revealed religions God means to endorse.

In a letter responding to Fleetwood, Hoadly rejected all of these claims. He began by taking issue with the claim that only God can work true miracles, and instead argued that any number of created beings can perform true miracles. He also rejected the claim that a true miracle has never been performed in opposition to a doctrine established by a true miracle. His strategy was to argue that some miracles *are greater* than others, and that performing more miracles does suggest divine concurrence. There is no problem allowing that other created beings can perform miracles, because God's miracles will always be greater, or in greater number, than miracles performed by other beings.

Fleetwood and Hoadly thus offered rival attempts to evade the circularity and establishment problems that were shown in the previous chapter to vex Hobbes's and Boyle's attempts to justify revelation. On Fleetwood's and Hoadly's accounts there is no need to appeal to previously established revelations (or, worse, the revealed doctrine itself) to justify the miracles performed to prove that a revelation comes from god. Right from the start, the possibility that miracles could have any other source is foreclosed, either because no other being can perform miracles, or because no other being could perform miracles of that quality or in that number.

Locke reacted to these rival attempts in *A Discourse of Miracles*. He there defined a miracle as “a sensible Operation, which being above the comprehension of the Spectator, and in his Opinion contrary to the establish'd Course of Nature, is taken by him to be Divine.”¹¹⁴ This might be called a “subjective” definition of miracles, as it makes the miraculous quality of an event depend on what the spectator considers incomprehensible and unnatural, and so opens the door to the possibility that what is a miracle for one person might not be so for another. In one fell swoop, this scuttles both Fleetwood's and Hoadly's enterprises, which presuppose an objective standard for the existence and (for Hoadly) also the greatness of miracles.

Locke's subjective definition allowed him to explain why some people are convinced by miracles while others are not. This is something that his opponents did not have the resources to explain, but that is needed to explain the disbelief of the Jews and of contemporary atheists.

Locke's account of how we establish that a miraculous event is divine involves identifying the cause of the event with superior power. But whereas for Fleetwood there is only one supernatural power that could cause an event, and for Hoadly there are events or aggregate numbers of events that could only be caused by the most superior among supernatural powers, for Locke there are no objective criteria that can be invoked to

¹¹⁴ Locke's *Discourse of Miracles* first appeared on pages 217-231 in: John Locke, *Posthumous works of Mr. John Locke*, London: J. Churchill, 1706, 217.

decide whether an event is unnatural, or more unnatural than a rival that also defies natural explanation. If we choose to believe an event is a miracle because our perplexity and amazement lead us to believe that it is caused by the most superior power, *and we are right*, the event will always in fact be a miracle caused by God. But there is no telling whether our amazement and perplexity are well-grounded. This leaves room in Locke's account for someone to not accept any event as miraculous. It is what allows him to be able to explain examples of disbelief.

Because Locke's definition of a miracle turns on what people are led to believe about the unnatural provenance of an event, it can be fleshed out by a fuller consideration of his account of the causes of belief in general. In the second part of this chapter I consider Locke's epistemology in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Here I show why it is that for Locke we can only ever *believe* that a miracle has occurred and God is its cause, we can never *know* it. I conclude by considering Locke's unpublished journal entries to argue that given that we can never know that a miracle has occurred Locke was skeptical that the argument from miracles could be used to form a suitable ground for the truth of Christianity.

Fleetwood and Hoadly recognized the issues brought about by the establishment problem. Fleetwood's response to this problem will lead to a further problem that I call the "self-reference problem." This is a problem that comes up when the New Testament is supposed to guarantee its own authority. This is a problem that Collins will eventually seize on. In his response to Fleetwood and Hoadly, Locke further degrades the argument from miracles by in effect making the case that the best the argument can provide is belief rather than knowledge about the revelation that the argument is supposed to vouch for.

2.1.1 Locke's Note

Locke ended *A Discourse of Miracles* with a short note that explains his inspiration for writing the work:

*These Thoughts Concerning Miracles, were occasion'd by my reading Mr. Fleetwood's Essay on Miracles, and the Letter writ to him on that Subject. The one of them defining a Miracle to be an extraordinary operation performable by God alone: And the other writing of Miracles without any definition of a Miracle at all.*¹¹⁵

In what follows, I begin by considering the works that Locke was responding to when he wrote *A Discourse* in order to show what we can learn about Locke's account by closely considering what he was responding to.¹¹⁶ What Locke identifies as "Mr. Fleetwood's *Essay on Miracles*" is William Fleetwood's *An Essay upon Miracles*.¹¹⁷ It was published in 1701 with the "Second Edition Corrected" published in 1702.¹¹⁸ The letter responding to this essay is *A Letter to Mr. Fleetwood Occasion'd by his late Essay on Miracles*.¹¹⁹ This letter was published anonymously in 1702 by Benjamin Hoadly, but was republished in 1715 under his name in *Several tracts formerly published: now collected into one volume*.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 231.

¹¹⁶ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 66 claims that *A Discourse of Miracles* "seems to have been the direct source of much that we find in later defenders of orthodoxy such as Clarke, Conybeare, and Sherlock, and so, from this point of view of historical influence, it is more important than any of the earlier discussions." He does not expand on his evidence for this claim. I suspect that the similarity that we see between Locke's account and Hoadly's, which Burns does not consider, lessens the force somewhat.

¹¹⁷ Following from Locke's note, Fleetwood's *An Essay Upon Miracles*, is often mentioned as part of his inspiration for writing *A Discourse*. However, almost nothing is ever said about any of Fleetwood's arguments, with even less being said about Hoadly. See for example, T. Brian Mooney and Anthony Imbrosciano, "The Curious Case of Mr. Locke's miracles," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 57, 2005, 156. One notable exception is Burns, *Great Debate*, who covers Fleetwood's view in detail, although, he never mentions Hoadly.

¹¹⁸ William Fleetwood. *An Essay Upon Miracles*, Charles Harper: London, 1702. I cite the last lifetime edition of 1702.

¹¹⁹ [Benjamin Hoadly]. *A Letter to Mr. Fleetwood Occasion'd by his late Essay on Miracles*, John Nutt: London, 1702.

¹²⁰ Benjamin Hoadly. *Several tracts formerly published: now collected into one volume*, J. Knapton and T. Childe: London, 1715.

2.1.2 William Fleetwood's *An Essay upon Miracles*

Fleetwood was born in 1656 in London and was educated at Eton College and later was a fellow at King's College, Cambridge. During his life he gained a reputation as a Whig clergyman. He first published *An Essay upon Miracles* in 1701 using material that he had collected while working on his Boyle lecture. However, he ended up not being able to deliver the lecture because of ill health. He is known in economic circles because of the publication of *Chronicon preciosum* (1707), which charted the value of money as well as corn and other commodities across the previous six hundred years.¹²¹ This is one of the earliest examples of an argument that shows how the value of money changes over time.

An Essay upon Miracles is written as a dialogue between characters "A" and "B." The overall view that the work presents can't be explicitly attributed to either character. However, it is set up so that character "A" is asking character "B" to educate him about miracles and their use. Character "B" is largely responsible for pushing the agenda of *An Essay* through much of the Dialogue. Character "A" sometimes presents his own claims and arguments that are clearly intended to be a part of the larger point of the dialogue, but most of the time this character asks the questions that move the dialogue along. Character "A" is not particularly probing with his questions and ends up eventually accepting all the arguments that are presented with little struggle.

Fleetwood defined a miracle as, "*An extraordinary Operation of God, against the known Course, and settled Laws of Nature, appealing to the Senses.*"¹²² He argued that we establish the known course of nature through observation and experience. "The Operations that are constant, certain, and expected, are those we call the *Ordinary Ones*. And this is the known Course of Nature . . ." ¹²³ For Fleetwood the senses are the "sole

¹²¹ Stuart Handley, "Fleetwood, William (1656–1723)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2011 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/article/9691, accessed 20 May 2017.

¹²² Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 2.

¹²³ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 3.

and proper Judges of what the way of Nature is.”¹²⁴ Accordingly, we can only know the way of nature through observation and experience.

To establish that only God can perform miracles Fleetwood claimed that only God’s power can unsettle the course of nature. He considered this to be a consequence of the fact that only God’s power could settle the course of nature. It would be a defect were God “to leave the Laws of his Creation at the Will and Mercy of created Beings.”¹²⁵ (Perhaps, it would suggest that God had not completed the job of instituting natural laws if some of his own creatures were left with the power to suspend or defy those laws.) A subsidiary consideration is that miracles would lose their purpose if other created beings could perform them. The purpose of a miracle is “the attesting to the Mission of any Messenger of God, and giving him Credit with those to whom he is sent.”¹²⁶ On Fleetwood’s model, when a person says that they have a message from God, they then need to be able to perform a miracle in order to prove it. If they can perform a miracle, this proves that their message is from God. But then only God can be responsible for allowing a person to perform miracles. The Devil and other created beings can’t be allowed to perform true miracles. They can’t even perform events that *appear* to be miracles, or what we might think of as false miracles or tricks. Since a miracle is just what is contrary to our experience of the laws of nature there is no room for there to be false miracles. An event is either contrary to our experience of the laws of nature, and so miraculous, or not contrary, and so not a miracle. There cannot be events that seem to be miracles; there can only be miracles and natural occurrences. If an event seems to us to be a miracle, then it is. Were there to be a situation where the devil, or another evil created being performed a miracle, the power to perform this miracle would have to have been granted to this being by God.

Fleetwood applied these doctrines to two Old Testament passages that involve the performance of miracles by a being other than God. The first is the story of Moses and

¹²⁴ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 3.

¹²⁵ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 6.

¹²⁶ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 8.

the Egyptian sorcerers. Fleetwood's treatment of this case rests on a liberal interpretation of the Biblical passage. He allowed that when the Egyptian sorcerers performed acts that matched Moses's miracles, these events were also miracles. But he insisted that the power to perform these miracles came from God.

According to Fleetwood, even though the Egyptian sorcerers were able to work miracles they didn't know that they had this power until they performed the miracle. When God simply allows other created beings to work miracles they never know that they have this power or how much they will be able to do with it. The Egyptian sorcerers discovered that their power had run out when they tried to turn dust into lice and were not able to. This implies that Moses should have been in no better a position. He, too, being a creature, might be thought to have been able to have no advance knowledge of whether God would be on his side in his efforts until after he had been successful in the performance. But Fleetwood rejected this implication, drawing on a distinction between "providential" and "evidential" miracles. Evidential miracles are miracles, "which God enables Men to work in order to gain belief, and which they know before-hand, they shall work."¹²⁷ (Presumably, this is because God has appeared to them and given them a commission, and performed miracles before their eyes to prove that he really is who he says he is and has gone on to assure them that he will enable them to perform like miracles in his service.) Providential miracles on the other hand, "are wrought, we know not certainly why, neither did the Instruments that wrought them, know any thing of them, before they were actually done."¹²⁸ Fleetwood went on to claim that it is reasonable to think that God will perform providential miracles in all ages to "attest his Providence, his Care, Protection, and Government of the World."¹²⁹ The idea as he expanded on it, is that if God didn't perform these kinds of miracles, people would begin to rely too much on the regularity of things and loosen their belief in the existence of a superior being with power over nature. Some providential miracles serve to shock people

¹²⁷ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 120.

¹²⁸ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 120.

¹²⁹ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 121.

back into recognizing God's existence and reflecting on what it means for them. Fleetwood also maintained that God sometimes performs miracles "purely for the Benefit of some particular Persons, without any Respect had to the Confirmation of any Truth or Message."¹³⁰ Not every story of a miraculous healing, or some miraculous event that saved a person's life has to be false, though Fleetwood suggested that most of them probably are.

However, consistently with orthodox Christian doctrine, Fleetwood only allowed that providential miracles will have happened after the time of the Gospel. There can have been no evidential miracles since that time. (Presumably this is because, as St. Paul put it, supposing evidential miracles to still be required in later days would be to "render the Cross of Christ of none effect." God's great self-sacrifice would have been pointless and foolish if yet more were still required in order to ensure the salvation of all those he wills to save.)

This approach ran into a problem when Fleetwood turned to Deuteronomy 13:1-5. The Egyptian sorcerers were not performing evidential miracles. They were instead engaged in a contest with Moses to see who had the greatest power to perform providential miracles, and as long as they were bested in the end God's providential purpose was served. But Deuteronomy spoke of a false prophet who performs evidential miracles — miracles to establish doctrines contrary to those God wished his people to accept. If we follow the reasoning used in the case of Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers, and understand the wonders performed by the prophet who was sent to test our faith as true miracles, then a true miracle verifies the message of a false prophet. But then providential miracles lose their status as signs that God means to endorse the message being delivered by the prophet. As character "A" points out, when understood this way, "a miracle in my Judgment, must go for nothing. . . for a miracle I see, proves both alike."¹³¹

¹³⁰ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 122.

¹³¹ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 55-56.

Fleetwood's solution to this problem was to claim that although in certain cases a false prophet's "wonders" might take the form of accurate predictions, they could never be true miracles because God would never permit miracles to be performed in support of contradictory messages. Under the pressure of the Deuteronomy case, Fleetwood was forced to draw a distinction between "wonders" and "true miracles." Wonders are strange or amazing events, while true miracles are events that involve a law of nature being broken by divine power (the only power that can break a law of nature). No true miracle has ever been performed in opposition to a doctrine established by a true miracle, though some wonders might be.¹³² This raises an obvious question. We need to have a way to distinguish between wonders and true miracles. As noted earlier, there is not a lot of room for such a distinction. Either events are contrary to known laws of nature or they aren't. If they are they are not merely wondrous, but miraculous. If they aren't they are merely natural so how could they be wondrous? Fleetwood's answer to this question is suggested by a remark that people have been given "sufficient Proofs of the Unity of his Godhead" and "sufficient Cautions against Idolatry" that they should not allow their reason to be overruled by "a lucky Guess, or a sagacious Prævision, or an impudent Pretence of Prophecy, coming to pass, and notably fulfilled."¹³³ There need be nothing contrary to known laws of nature about a lucky guess, or a sly anticipation based on well known natural causes concealed from others (think of insider trading on the stock market) or an impudent prophecy that accidentally comes true. But these sorts of cases can excite our wonder notwithstanding that they are purely natural. We would be wrong to take them as anything more than tricks or lucky occurrences. To take them as true miracles would be tantamount to recognizing a rival power to break laws of nature, and Fleetwood maintained that the truth of monotheism is sufficiently evident to rule that out and lead us to default to the view that wonders are naturally caused events that amaze us merely because there is something accidental or lucky or duplicitous about them.

¹³² Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 56-57.

¹³³ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 60-61.

Fleetwood rejected the use of doctrine in establishing the occurrence of a miracle, and it might be objected that his reliance on “Proofs of the Unity of the Godhead” or “sufficient Cautions against Idolatry” constitutes an antecedent doctrinal commitment that is in tension with that policy. But nothing could be further from the case. If Frank preaches that there are twin, good and evil principles, and brings off some wondrous performance to prove that he is speaking on the authority of at least one of them (perhaps he makes a lucky guess about the next rain shower), then Fleetwood would maintain that the inconsistency of Frank’s message with accepted religious traditions is no good reason for dismissing it. Fleetwood would instead be content to retreat to the claim that there is nothing miraculous about a lucky guess, so Frank’s claim remains unsupported. When Fleetwood appealed to the doctrine of monotheism it was not to reject any particular revelation, not even Frank’s. It was to make the more general point that miracles performed in favor of rival revelations are not to be expected because we have reason to believe that the laws of nature were instituted and upheld by a single being. The “sufficient Proofs of the Unity of his Godhead” that he invoked are likely drawn from the consideration that the world we see around us is too well integrated in its operations to be the product of warring causal principles, and they are not offered to discredit any special revelation, even Frank’s, but only offered as a reason for being careful not to take any accidental or chance occurrence, however surprising, for a miracle.

This having been said, Fleetwood was still confronted with the task of distinguishing between wonders and miracles, or between the work of a clever trickster and a genuine work of God. This is really just the problem of diabolic imposture in a slightly different form. In the end, maintaining that only God can perform miracles doesn’t solve the problem posed by the worry that demons might also perform miracles. It merely replaces it with the related problem of being able to distinguish true miracles from wonders. Concerns like this led to Locke’s epistemological account of miracles.

Before turning to Hoadly, there are two aspects of Fleetwood’s treatment of New Testament miracles that merits mention. Fleetwood proposed that.

The Method I shall take, if you approve it, will be this,—*First*, to show you that it was expected, that *Christ*, or the *Messiah*, should work Miracles. *Secondly*, That *Jesus* did actually work Miracles. And *Thirdly*, Speak to the *End* for which, he said himself he wrought them.¹³⁴

In undertaking the first part of his method, Fleetwood cited verses from the New and the Old Testament that suggest the Jews were expecting their messiah to come, and that this person, like Moses, would be able to perform miracles. According to Fleetwood, most prophets couldn't perform miracles, "so that to expect a Prophet that should work Miracles, was to expect a *great* Prophet indeed,"¹³⁵ There is an interesting suggestion here that by performing miracles Jesus was not just proving that his message had divine authority, but also fulfilling Biblical prophecy. But, as intriguing as this suggestion may be in light of later developments, it is likely that Fleetwood did not mean to say that Christ performed miracles in order to prove that he was the messiah who had been prophesized. Fleetwood understood miracles apart from the fulfillment of prior prophecy. For him, prophets perform miracles to show that they are messengers from God, not to show that they are the prophets (or messiahs) foretold in documents written before their time. But his remarks on this topic do foreshadow later developments and may even have played some role in inspiring them.

In undertaking the second part of his method, Fleetwood argued that Jesus actually did work miracles. Fleetwood attempted this by claiming that everyone agrees equally to this conclusion. "It appears therefore from the Testimony of his Followers and Disciples, and of those who were neither, but only cur'd and restor'd by him, and of those who hated him, and persecuted him to Death, that Jesus Christ did truly work great Miracles."¹³⁶ The reason that Jesus came and worked miracles was so that, "he might be believed to come from God, and that what he should deliver as God's Will, was certainly so."¹³⁷ The

¹³⁴ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 66.

¹³⁵ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 66.

¹³⁶ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 73.

¹³⁷ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 76.

central point Fleetwood was trying to establish is that the “Doctrine of *Jesus Christ* is true, and ought to be believ’d, because it was prov’d establish’d, and confirm’d by Miracles.”¹³⁸ Strangely, he never considered that all the testimony for Jesus’s miracles comes from the Gospel. This type of testimony, even if it suggests that everyone agreed that Jesus performed miracles can hardly be read as impartial.

Moreover, to appeal to the doctrine of the New Testament, is to engage in an enterprise that Fleetwood rejected. The rejection comes up when Character “A” asks character “B,” “What (for example) must I do, when I am told, that I must not judge of the truth of a Doctrine, by the Miracles that are wrought in confirmation of it, but must judge of Miracles, by the Doctrine they would establish?”¹³⁹ Fleetwood argued, using both the voice of character “A” and character “B,” that to consider the doctrine in order to verify a miracle is to beg the question. In effect, Fleetwood invoked the circularity problem as a reason against using the doctrine that is being delivered by a prophet in order to establish that the miracle that vouches for it comes from God. But Fleetwood did this very thing himself when relying on the testimony recorded in the New Testament as proof that the miracles recorded in the New Testament really did occur. Since those miracles were performed in order to establish that the New Testament is the word of God, we see the performance of miracles being cited as if it could serve to verify testimony to the effect that those very miracles were performed.

This is a more immediately question-begging version of the circularity problem. It might be called the self-reference problem. The circularity problem arises when it is granted that the miracle occurred (perhaps we experienced it ourselves, or know the witnesses and have reason to trust them), and granted that it occurred in order to prove that a message has been delivered on the authority of a superior power, and the consistency of that revealed message with revelation is invoked to determine whether that superior power is God. In contrast, the self-reference problem arises when the occurrence of a

¹³⁸ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 89 in the text this is a question rather than a statement and is followed with the response, “That Consequence is unavoidable, and makes it self.”

¹³⁹ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 89.

miracle is not known by personal experience or independent historical testimony, but is itself among the revealed truths that the occurrence of that very miracle is supposed to authenticate. Only a few years later, Collins and others were to seize on this problem, writing that miracles can never render a foundation sound that is itself unsound. However many miracles may be revealed in the New Testament to have been performed, their being thus revealed in the New Testament is no reason for accepting that the New Testament is an authentic book of revelation. Later British thinkers turned to a rather different account of the foundations of revealed religion, one according to which the fulfillment of prophecies recorded in historical records in the keeping of the rabbis of a rival religion is a better proof of the truth of Christianity than the testimony to the occurrence of miracles found in the New Testament.

2.1.3 Benjamin Hoadly's *A Letter to Mr. Fleetwood Occasion'd by his late Essay on Miracles*.

Benjamin Hoadly was born in 1676 in Kent, and became perhaps one of the most famous churchmen of his generation. He is perhaps best known for arguing against passive obedience. This led to a long personal feud with the high-churchman Francis Atterbury. Rather than alienating Fleetwood who was also gaining a significant reputation among the low-churchmen, Hoadly's letter, written early in his career, is said to have gained Fleetwood's admiration.¹⁴⁰ As I previously mentioned, it was originally written anonymously. Although it is possible that Locke knew who wrote it, there is no reason to believe that he did. When referring to the author of this letter I use Hoadly's name because it is easier than referring to him as "the author of the letter." This being said, it is worth keeping in mind that the letter was originally written anonymously while Fleetwood's essay was not.

Hoadly began his letter by pointing to two claims at the foundation of his disagreement with Fleetwood. The first is that "none but God can work a *True Miracle*." The second is

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Taylor, "Hoadly, Benjamin (1676–1761)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/article/13375, accessed 20 May 2017].

that “a *True Miracle*, or a Work which we cannot distinguish from a *True Miracle*, has been, or may be, ever wrought in opposition to any Doctrine or Pretence establish’d upon *True Miracles*.”¹⁴¹ Hoadly’s plan is to first “represent a *Scheme*” different than Fleetwood’s, then to show that this scheme can be followed without causing any problems for the truth of religion—by which he meant that his view can be shown to be consistent with the Bible. He concluded by presenting a number of arguments against Fleetwood’s position.¹⁴² Notwithstanding that he published this letter anonymously, he was very careful to establish that other people also hold the view he was arguing for. The system he presented is, he claimed, “not according to my own Sentiments only, but as I have reason to think, according to those of several learned and judicious Persons.”¹⁴³

Curiously, given what Locke said to the contrary in his note, Hoadly provided what appears to be a definition of miracle early in his letter, “But, before I begin, it is necessary for me to præmise, that I mean by *Miracles*, the *same Works*, or *Works of the same Nature*, with those done by *Moses* and *Christ*, which the *Scripture* and we call *Miracles*.”¹⁴⁴ This definition is admittedly ostensive. Hoadly defined a miracle by providing examples of events that we identify as miracles. But ostensive definitions are still definitions. Locke may have claimed that Hoadly’s letter provides no definition of miracle at all because he considered it so lacking as to be no definition at all.¹⁴⁵

Hoadly’s strategy, at least in part, was to expose inconsistencies in the details of Fleetwood’s account. For example, Hoadly charged that Fleetwood ought to have considered Jesus’s walking on water to be a paradigm example of a miracle. Hoadly then cited a passage in the *Essay upon Miracles* where Fleetwood claimed that there is nothing contrary to laws of nature in a spirit being powerful enough to carry a person through the

¹⁴¹ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 2.

¹⁴² [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 2-3.

¹⁴³ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ As far as I know, no one has ever noticed that, in spite of what Locke said in his note, Hoadly did present a definition of miracle.

air, so that this would not be a true miracle. Hoadly objected that it is harder to carry someone through the air than to hold them up on water. So, if there is nothing miraculous about the first, there should be nothing miraculous about the second.¹⁴⁶ But then Fleetwood's paradigm example of a miracle would not be a miracle. It would not do to object that when God does it, it could be by way of violating laws of nature whereas when other spirits do it they must find a way to manage it in accord with laws of nature. In that case, the same event both is and isn't a miracle depending on whose power caused it, and it is perfectly reasonable to imagine a power other than God causing this event.

Hoadly also attacked Fleetwood's claims that there are no greater or lesser miracles and that the performance of more miracles does not give the advantage to the person performing them. Hoadly granted that if a power can create a fly then it can create an elephant. But, he objected, it does not follow that it is as easy to turn water into wine, as it is to make a fly or to make an elephant. (Perhaps assembling pre-existing materials to make a living thing is easier than transmuting substances. Build a house and you can build a bigger house, but it does not follow that you can turn lead into gold.) This argument extends to all of the different types of miracles. According to Hoadly, there is no reason to think that it should follow from the fact that a being has the power to perform one type of miraculous action that they should also have the power to perform a different type. Hoadly also pointed out that Fleetwood fell into using the language of greater and lesser miracles *while* arguing against the distinction. Hoadly cited Fleetwood's claim that, "One Miracle appears greater than another, because of its greater Consequences, and because it affects our outward Senses more."¹⁴⁷ (It certainly looks as if this example grounds the appearance of greatness in the reality of greatness.)

Hoadly had a number of reasons for concluding that some miracles require greater power than others. It takes more power to hold a mountain in the air than it would to hold a person, and it takes more power to turn all of the water in a river into blood than just a

¹⁴⁶ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 3-5.

¹⁴⁷ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 112.

teaspoon of water.¹⁴⁸ If one being turns a teaspoon of water to blood while another turns a whole river into blood, we can safely say that the second being has demonstrated more power than the first.

As noted earlier, Hoadly at one point conceded that if a power can create a fly then it can create an elephant. His claim that it takes more power to turn a river into blood than a teaspoon of water shows that the earlier concession was offered merely for the sake of showing that even if Fleetwood were granted the claim about the fly and the elephant, there would still be a counter-argument. Hoadly's principled position was that this concession should be resisted. A person who could create an elephant is more powerful than a person who could only create a fly.

Hoadly further argued that there are works that require more knowledge and that this suggests more power. The examples that he gave are in the form of an analogy. He began by pointing out that it takes greater skill and knowledge to put back together a whole broken machine than it does to fix a single broken gear. Analogously, it takes more knowledge to put the whole body in working order again after the soul has left it than it does to fix a single part of the body.¹⁴⁹ Given this, a miracle in which a person is brought back to life demonstrates more power than a miracle in which some part of a person is healed.¹⁵⁰

Hoadly claimed that miracles are greater when they show that God is with a person more. He didn't expand on what he meant by this, but he claimed that God is with someone who brings a dead person back more than he is with someone he helps to walk on water. Given this, bringing a person back to life is a greater miracle than allowing a person to walk on water.

¹⁴⁸ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 8.

¹⁴⁹ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 9-10

¹⁵⁰ Joseph Houston. *Reported Miracles*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 39 uses a strikingly similar example in his discussion of Locke, although in a slightly different context.

Turning to the second topic, Hoadly wanted to show that a person performing many miracles has an advantage over a person who performs fewer miracles. To do this he first pointed out that although Fleetwood wanted to claim that working more miracles does not show a greater authority in the person performing them, in some places he also seems to have suggested that it does.¹⁵¹ Hoadly went on to argue that performing a number of miracles is more convincing than performing a single miracle because a series of miracles reduces the chances of “a lucky Event, or happy opportunity.”¹⁵² This is especially the case when a series of miracles differ in any considerable circumstance. Following from this, many miracles that are not of the same type give an even greater advantage to the person who performs them “as they give the world a yet greater assurance that He has a power of working *True Miracles*.”¹⁵³ A variety of miracles of different sorts also demonstrate a more comprehensive and extensive power and, following from this, a greater one. The idea here is that in a contest between two people, both performing miracles, the person who can perform more miracles is more powerful.

Hoadly continued that, if his arguments successfully establish that some miracles are greater than others, and that working more miracles shows more support from God than working fewer, then it is perfectly reasonable to accept, “That God may permit *wicked Spirits* to work *Miracles*, in opposition to Himself, and the Truth; since He can make this apparent difference between the Person on whose part He acts, and the other: and because He *can*, therefore I’m sure He *Will*.”¹⁵⁴

In addition to offering this “scheme” for opposing Fleetwood, Hoadly also wanted to show that the system he had presented “may be maintain’d without the least præjudice to *True Religion*.”¹⁵⁵ This involved applying what he had just argued to various passages from the Bible.

¹⁵¹ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 11.

¹⁵² [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 11.

¹⁵³ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 12.

¹⁵⁴ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 14.

¹⁵⁵ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 14.

Hoadly began this process with the story of Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers. Here the application of his argument is straightforward. Moses was more powerful than the sorcerers because he worked more miracles. Hoadly also showed that his view does not require the claim that the sorcerers didn't know they would be able to perform miracles until they actually did them. Hoadly was able to allow that the false prophets of Matthew 24:24 work true miracles. However, Jesus's miracles are clearly more powerful and because of this, "as they will prefer him to any, who has ever appear'd in the World yet, so they doubt not of a great and apparent *Victory* (in case of opposition) over any *worker of Miracles*, who shall ever appear here after."¹⁵⁶

This part of Hoadly's letter ends with the suggestion that miracles should not be the only argument for the truth of Christianity, as Fleetwood had suggested.

For *Miracles* are not the only Argument for it nor ought ever to be consider'd so, by any who write on that Subject: and therefore, I say, since I believe *Jesus Christ was the Son of God*, not only because He did these Miracles, but because He exactly *fulfill'd* all the former *Prophecies* which the Jews had been taught to understand of their *Messiah*, because He taught so excellent a *Doctrine*, and because He was so perfectly *good* and *holy* Himself; I cannot part with this belief, *only* on the force of *Miracles*.¹⁵⁷

Unlike Fleetwood, Hoadly was willing to ground the truth of Christianity in every available source. He was willing to ground its truth in miracles if we can find a coherent way to do so. He also seems to have been happy to ground it in the doctrine, supported by the context of how Jesus lived his life. In addition, he was also happy to ground Christianity in the "exactly *fulfill'd*" prophecies. This last view, subsequently maintained by Clarke and Whiston and searchingly investigated by Collins, is examined in greater detail in the final chapter. These thinkers argued, at least prior to encountering Collins's reasoning on this subject, that we can't ground the truth of Christianity in miracles.

¹⁵⁶ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 19.

¹⁵⁷ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 20.

To conclude, I consider Hoadly's response to Fleetwood's use of the circularity problem. Fleetwood pointed to the circularity problem as an argument against using doctrine to help establish that a miracle divine. In response, Hoadly claimed that God will perform miracles to vouch for those who teach a doctrine worthy of God. On the other hand, "I know the *Devil* will not do any thing to establish the Authority of a Person, who teaches true *Reason* in the Matter of *Religion*."¹⁵⁸ So for Hoadly, we are able to tell the difference between a miracle performed by God and one performed by the devil by considering the doctrine that the miracle is supposed to vouch for. This is because the doctrine supported by the miracle coming from God will be reasonable. Following from this, Hoadly continues his argument by claiming that God would not let a person perform as many powerful miracles as Jesus did, "if this Person taught a Doctrine *contrary*, in any respect, to his Nature and Attributes."¹⁵⁹ This works in the case of Jesus, but leaves a question about prophets who only performed one, or a few miracles, but nonetheless preached a message someone like Hoadly might want to accept. In these situations, considering the doctrine is very important. Hoadly continued:

To *beg the question*, is to take the thing for granted that is to be prov'd. Now, as I take it, the thing to be prov'd is, *that Jesus was sent of God*. Now, I desire to know, if the *being and attributes of God* are not suppos'd to be known from *Reason* before any *Revelation*? I desire to know, if I must not have as much proof that this Person comes from a *holy Being*, as that He comes from a *powerful one*? And, tho' his teaching never so *reasonable a Doctrine* will not prove He comes from *God*, and has an *extraordinary Commission* from *Him* to teach it; yet *His* teaching an *unreasonable Doctrine*, his making *God* an Encourager of Vice, or Discourager of Virtue, is a greater evidence that he *cannot* come from *God*, than the doing of a *Miracle* can be that He does: to me, I mean, who think that a *power*

¹⁵⁸ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 22.

¹⁵⁹ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 24-25.

less than God's may do some of those things we acknowledge *Miracles*, and who cannot separate *holiness* from the Notion of God.¹⁶⁰

Considering the doctrine will not allow us to know that a person's message has been endorsed by a powerful and holy being, but it will allow us to establish when someone is trying to present an unreasonable doctrine. In this case, even if a miracle is performed we can know that the message that it is trying to vouch for is not divine. According to Hoadly, miracles are one argument to prove that a revealed message is from God—but even with a miracle—if the “*Doctrine be absurd, or contrary to the Notions of God, Reason teaches us, and the matter before us supposes already in the world, nothing can prove it; and therefore we may, and ought to look into the Doctrine any Person teaches, who pretends He comes from God.*”¹⁶¹

2.1.4 John Locke's *A Discourse of Miracles*

As we might expect given his note at the end of *A Discourse*, Locke was interested in establishing— with a little bit of rhetorical flair—why he thought defining a miracle is so important. “To discourse of Miracles without defining, what one means by the word Miracle, is to make a shew, but in effect to talk of nothing.”¹⁶² Locke went on to define a miracle as “a sensible Operation, which being above the comprehension of the Spectator, and in his Opinion contrary to the establishe'd Course of Nature, is taken by him to be Divine.”¹⁶³ This definition can be read as a list of necessary conditions for an event to be understood as a miracle:

- (1) It is a “sensible operation”
- (2) It is “above the comprehension of the Spectator”
- (3) It is “in his Opinion contrary to the establishe'd Course of Nature”

¹⁶⁰ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 25.

¹⁶¹ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 25-26.

¹⁶² Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 217.

¹⁶³ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 217.

(4) It is “taken by him to be Divine”¹⁶⁴

Given Locke’s definition, if we believe that an event is a miracle, we believe that the event has a divine cause. While this echoes Fleetwood’s claim that only God can perform miracles, there are some important differences. For Fleetwood, that only God can perform miracles is the conclusion of an argument. For Locke, that a miracle is understood to have a divine cause is merely one of the conditions for establishing that an event is a miracle. More importantly, for Locke the conclusion that the cause of a miraculous event is God is something that we believe about this event. We come to this belief following a reasoning process.

Locke considered two objections to his subjective definition. The first is “That hereby what is a Miracle is made very uncertain; for it depending on the Opinion of the Spectator, that will be a Miracle to one which will not be so to another.”¹⁶⁵ This is the obvious objection to any subjective definition of miracle. We might think that if a law of nature is broken, everyone in attendance would recognize it. Locke’s response was that this objection “is of no force,” unless the person objecting can present a definition that is not subject to the same problem. If we all agree that a miracle is an event that “surpasses the force of Nature in the establish’d, steady Laws of Causes and Effects” then we must all deal with the fact that people judge these laws by their “own acquaintance with Nature, and notions of its Force (which are different in different Men).” Importantly, the acquaintance here is not simply limited acquaintance as opposed to broad acquaintance. There would be no problem if, whenever we disagreed about the laws of nature, it was because the person with the more limited acquaintance got the laws wrong because of their more limited acquaintance. But it is not so simple. For Locke there is not just limited and broad acquaintance, but different acquaintance. This makes it impossible to dismiss an opponent’s views on the ground that they have only an imperfect

¹⁶⁴ See for example, J. J. Macintosh. “Locke and Boyle on miracles and God’s existence,” *Robert Boyle reconsidered*, (ed.) Michael Hunter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 203. For a different reading of these conditions and their connection to revelation see Mooney and Imbrosciano, “Curious Case,” 161-162.

¹⁶⁵ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 217.

acquaintance. Those with the most extensive acquaintance do not always agree on the laws of nature. Their acquaintance, extensive as it is, leads them to different conclusions. In good part, this is because laws of nature are not known by intuiting or demonstrating relations between ideas, but are only probabilistically inferred from acquaintance with natural regularities. These regularities are far from easy to uncover. Discovering them is the business of scientific investigation, and it is a business that scientists themselves reach different conclusions about from day to day, often reversing the decision today that they reached yesterday, only to go back to yesterday's decision tomorrow, so that the most experienced scientist of today may be as far from getting the actual laws right as a regular person standing in the street.¹⁶⁶ If it were obvious what the laws of nature are, we would all agree when the laws have been broken, but we don't, as is proven by the fact that an event that is a miracle for one person is not a miracle for someone else.¹⁶⁷ Everyone has a different acquaintance with the laws of nature and we will all apply this acquaintance differently.¹⁶⁸

This observation is at the center of a problem with both Fleetwood's and Hoadly's accounts. Fleetwood insisted that we are all familiar enough with the laws of nature to know when one is broken. Similarly, although Hoadly allowed that created beings other than God can perform miracles he suggested that we can identify divine miracles either because of their superior power, or because of their superior number. He later added that we can know not to trust miracles when the doctrine that they vouch for conflicts with reason. Neither Fleetwood nor Hoadly recognized that there is in fact very little agreement on these matters, which suggests that the distinctions can't be as easily drawn as they seem to have supposed. We see this, for example, in the everyday experience of people who reject the miracles of Moses and Jesus. This raises the question of why some people are convinced by miracles while others are not. This is a question that neither

¹⁶⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (ed.) Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011. Cited "E" followed by book, chapter, paragraph: *E* IV.xvi.1-4, cf. *E* I.iii.2.

¹⁶⁷ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 217-218.

¹⁶⁸ For a much less positive reading of this passage see Mooney and Imbrosciano, "Curious Case," 158.

Fleetwood nor Hoadly had the resources to deal with but that Locke set his account up to answer.

Fleetwood did consider the question of how his system can “possibly account for the *Jewish Infidelity*,”¹⁶⁹ but admitted that none of the reasons that he could give are sufficient. What he saw as his strongest attempt was to claim that it had been spread among the Jews that the power of Jesus’s works came from the Devil and that he was a great magician. Once the Jewish people were convinced of these things, Jesus’s miracles no longer convinced them that his message came from God. Of course this was a grave mistake for the Jews to make supposing to be at all obvious, first, that only God can perform miracles, and second that any given event is or is not a violation of a law of nature and so a miracle. In giving this response Fleetwood was forced to recognize that it is possible for two people to experience the same event and come to very different conclusions about its cause. In effect, an event can be a miracle for one person and not for another.

The second objection to Locke’s subjective definition of miracle is that, “the notion of a Miracle thus enlarged, may come sometimes to take in Operations that have nothing extraordinary or supernatural in them, and thereby invalidate the use of Miracles for the attesting of Divine Revelation.”¹⁷⁰ The problem here is that if miracles are defined subjectively, then it is possible that a natural event might amaze people enough to be accepted as a miracle. On the subjective definition this would not be an immediate problem. As long as the revealed message that the purported miracle vouches for is accepted God’s intentions are served, whether or not the purported miracle is a supernatural event. However, if it later emerges that the purported miracle was merely a natural event, that could well have the undesirable effect of leading people to doubt the divine message it was offered to verify, and worse, question all other apparent miracles and so all of revealed truth. Locke’s preliminary response was to say, “To which I

¹⁶⁹ Fleetwood, *An Essay Upon Miracles*, 85.

¹⁷⁰ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 218.

answer, not at all, if the Testimony which Divine Revelation receives from Miracles be rightly consider'd.”¹⁷¹ Many commentators, wrongly I think, read Locke as claiming that rightly considering the testimony divine revelation receives from miracles simply means taking God to be their cause, whether by natural means (as he is cause of everything by natural means) or by supernatural.¹⁷² There is of course a sense in which this is true, because for Locke to say that an event is a miracle means that we believe that it has a divine cause. However, there is more to Locke's response.

Locke pointed out that arguments about divine revelation are only interested in miracles that help establish that a revealed message comes from God. “All other Miracles that are done in the World, how many or great, Revelation is not concern'd in.”¹⁷³ This significantly reduces the number of events that are under consideration. Locke was not interested in explaining all miracles, only those that help establish a revealed message. None of the ancient miracles meet this condition. Part of the reason for this is that miracles functioning as the credentials of a Divine religion “have no place but upon a supposition of one only true God.”¹⁷⁴ The ancients believed in many gods so they had no need for divine revelation. Since there were many gods, none had authority over the rest (otherwise this would be monotheism). So, there was no need for one god's message to be heeded over the rest. Thus, there was no need for miracles. According to Locke, there are only three candidates for religions that meet the criterion of believing in only one true God: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, “*Mahomet* having none to produce, pretends to no Miracles for the vouching his Mission.”¹⁷⁵ This leaves only Christianity

¹⁷¹ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 218.

¹⁷² Mooney and Imbrosciano, “Curious Case,” 159 read Locke's answer here as an example of what they call “pious conceit,” and then accuse him of “*petition principia*,” or begging the question. A little later on page 161 they claim that Locke's arguments in the *A Discourse of Miracles* involve a “vicious circularity.” I believe that they generate this circularity because they think that for Locke, to believe that a miracle has taken place requires a belief in God, and this belief in God is what allows us to believe that a miracle has taken place.

¹⁷³ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 219.

¹⁷⁴ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 220.

¹⁷⁵ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 221.

and Judaism and their representatives Jesus and Moses.¹⁷⁶ Given these parameters, the task before us reduces to considering whether these miracles might fail to attest to divine revelation because they have nothing “extraordinary or supernatural in them.” Locke dismissed this worry.

[T]he only Revelations that come attested by Miracles, being only those of *Moses* and *Christ*, and they confirming each other, the business of Miracles, as it stands really in matter of Fact, has no manner of difficulty in it; and I think the most scrupulous or sceptical cannot from Miracles raise the least doubt against the Divine Revelation of the Gospel.¹⁷⁷

Because there are effectively no competing revealed religious traditions each supported by their own miracle stories the whole problem of determining which miracle stories are the authentic ones simply does not arise.

However Locke recognized that the “Speculative and Learned” will not be content with this reply. He responded with what on the surface appears to be a very strong claim, “I crave leave to say that he who comes with a Message from God to be deliver’d to the World, cannot be refus’d belief if he vouches his Mission by a Miracle, because his credentials have a right to it.”¹⁷⁸ Locke was claiming that if we believe that the event

¹⁷⁶ Mooney and Imbrosciano, “Curious Case,” 164-165 take a jab at Locke claiming that his arguments “smack of pure prejudice and exclusivism” and that “This is manifest in the kind of colonialist arrogance evident in how Locke deals, in particular, with Eastern religions.” This is because Locke claims that the stories involving Zoroaster and Brahma are “so manifestly fabulous, that no account can be made of it.” On this point, I read Locke as willing to consider any religion that accepts one true God and that verifies the revelatory communications of this God to his prophets using miracles. As far as he knew the only two religions that meet these criteria are Judaism and Christianity. Perhaps it was with “colonialist arrogance” that he dismissed other (Eastern) religions because as far as he knew they do not meet these criteria, but there is nothing about his arguments that dismisses the claims of other religions *a priori* as inferior to Christianity as Mooney and Imbrosciano claim. If a religion believed in one true God—a claim that for Locke is something that we know and that follows from reason—and also, used miracles to vouch for revealed messages coming from God, he would have to at least consider the miracles of this religion. That he is at least open to this as a conceptual possibility is supported by places where he allows that prophets working more powerful miracles than Jesus and the apostles would have to be taken seriously. See for example page 225, “till any one rising up in opposition to him shall do greater Miracles than he and his Apostles did” and page 227, “till a Mission attested by Operations of a greater force shall disprove them.”

¹⁷⁷ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 221.

¹⁷⁸ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 221.

used to vouch for a revealed message is a miracle, then we cannot refuse to believe this message. Because we believe that the miracle comes from God, we have to believe that the message that it is vouching for also comes from God. (I expand on the important part that belief plays in this in this story in the second part of this chapter).

Locke gave an example that helps to explain what exactly he has in mind:

For example, *Jesus of Nazareth* professes himself sent from God: He with a word calms a Tempest at Sea: This one looks on as a Miracle, and consequently cannot but receive his Doctrine: Another thinks this might be the effect of Chance, or Skill in the Weather and no Miracle, and so stands out; but afterwards seeing him walk on the Sea, owns that for a Miracle and believes: Which yet upon another has not that force, who suspects it may possibly be done by the assistance of a Spirit: But yet the same Person seeing afterwards our Saviour cure an invertebrate Palsie by a word, admits that for a Miracle, and becomes a Convert: Another over looking it in this instance, afterwards finds a Miracle in his giving sight to one born Blind, or in raising the Dead, or his raising himself from the Dead, and so receives his Doctrine as a Revelation coming from God. By all which it is plain, that where the Miracle is admitted, the Doctrine cannot be rejected; it comes with the assurance of a Divine Attestation to him that allows the Miracle, and he cannot question its Truth.¹⁷⁹

A three-point account of revealed religion has emerged. First, Locke thought that miracles are subjective. This follows from the fact that every person has their own understanding of the laws of nature and what it would take to break them. Second, although there perhaps have been miracles in all times and places, the only miracles that revealed religion is concerned with are those performed to establish that a revealed message comes from God. Finally, once we accept that a miracle has occurred we cannot reject the doctrine that it is vouching for.

¹⁷⁹ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 222; Burns, *The Great Debate*, 69 understands the importance of this passage somewhat differently.

In the cases where one person takes an event to be a miracle while another person witnessing it doesn't, the reason that the person doesn't take the event to be a miracle follows from certain conclusions that they make about the situation. So, in the first example, one person sees Jesus calm a storm at sea and accepts this event as a miracle. The person who doesn't accept the event as a miracle doesn't accept it because they think that, rather than being caused by God, it could simply be skill in forecasting the weather or chance that led to this outcome. Similarly, in the second case, the person who doesn't think that Jesus walking on water is a miracle comes to this conclusion because they think it is possible that a spirit is assisting. Given this, they conclude that the event is not divine. In each case the person who doesn't accept an event as a miracle does so for a reason. The reasoning process is central to Locke's account of miracles and revealed religion. Although Locke's example focuses on the reasons why the people who do not think that a miracle occurred think this, we should also expect that the people who *do* accept an event as a miracle have reasons for accepting this belief. We should imagine that these reasons involve the context within which the event happens, including characteristics about the person performing the miracle. This should include details that would lead them to believe that the testimony, which the revealed message was receiving from the miracle, was rightly considered.

This raises the question of what "shall be a sufficient inducement" to accept that an extraordinary event is a miracle. Locke's answer shows how he responded to the possibility of imposture. He first considered miracles that are contested. He then went on to establish how it is we can know that an uncontested miracle comes from God. In the case of contested miracles, we know the miracle that comes from God because it carries "the Marks of a greater power than appears in opposition to it."¹⁸⁰

For since God's Power is paramount to all, and no opposition can be made against him with an equal force to his; and since his Honour and Goodness can never be suppos'd to suffer his Messenger and his Truth to be born down by the

¹⁸⁰ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 223.

appearance of a greater Power on the side of an Imposter, and in favour of a Lie; wherever there is an opposition, and two pretending to be sent from Heaven clash, the signs which carry with them the evident marks of a greater Power, will always be a certain and unquestionable evidence that the Truth and Divine Mission is on that side on which they appear.¹⁸¹

Even though it may be beyond the capacity of a spectator to know the exact cause of a non-divine wondrous event, any spectator can draw a conclusion about which of two events “carry the evident marks of a greater and superior Power.”¹⁸² God would never allow a doctrine that opposes his to be supported by an event of even apparently superior power. Locke applied this account to the story of Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers. Both Moses and the sorcerers were able to produce “Serpents, Blood and Frogs,” and “the truth on either side could not have been determin’d if the matter had rested there.”¹⁸³

However, when Moses’s serpent ate the sorcerers’ serpent, and then when Moses was able to turn dust into lice while the sorcerers could not, “the decision was easie.” This is not to say that the decision was certain, or that there was only one way to interpret the events, but it is to say that we can be confident, if not assured, that it is the correct one.

Similarly, “the number, variety and greatness” of Jesus’s miracles, “carry with them such strong marks of an extraordinary Divine Power, that the Truth of his Mission will stand firm and unquestionable, till anyone rising up in opposition to him shall do greater Miracles than he and his Apostles did.”¹⁸⁴ Although we cannot know the “uttermost Power of natural Agents or created Beings” we can know that God’s omnipotence makes him the most powerful. Given this, power is a “sure guide to Divine Revelation” when it is being used to vouch that a revealed message comes from God. Again, when Locke said that power can be a sure guide to divine revelation, he did not mean that an event will

¹⁸¹ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 223.

¹⁸² Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 224.

¹⁸³ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 224.

¹⁸⁴ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 225.

provide certainty. But this is only because no certainty can be had of any matter of probability. We can still be assured or at least confident of the result.

Locke applied these considerations to uncontested events, where superior power is also invoked, along with three further considerations. The first is that a divine message will always properly honor God.¹⁸⁵ Because natural religion and the rules of morality follow from natural reason, no revealed message can be accepted that conflicts with these, as such a message would make God appear less than fully rational. This echoes Hoadly's letter, which claims that that we can know that a doctrine comes from the devil if it is inconsistent with reason, as well as Boyle's belief that revelation must be consistent with reason and natural religion. A revealed message also has to be consistent with reason because otherwise it would "destroy the evidence and use of Reason, without which Men cannot be able to distinguish Divine Revelation from Diabolical Imposture."¹⁸⁶

A second factor bearing on whether an uncontested event is divine is that God will not use revelation to inform us "of things indifferent, and of small moment, or that are knowable by the use of their natural Faculties."¹⁸⁷ This is not to say that God can't use revelation to inform us of small things, or things that are knowable by our natural faculties. It just means that he won't. Locke expanded on this point somewhat in the *Essay*.

God only uses revelation when he needs to establish, "some supernatural Truths relating to the Glory of God, and some great concern of Men."¹⁸⁸ These events can be received as divine until the "operations of a greater force shall disprove them."¹⁸⁹ Since miracles are "the only means God is conceived to have to satisfie Men as rational Creatures of the

¹⁸⁵ Locke here uses the double negative "will never not honor."

¹⁸⁶ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 226.

¹⁸⁷ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 227.

¹⁸⁸ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 227.

¹⁸⁹ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 227.

certainty of anything he would reveal,”¹⁹⁰ and since God’s power has no equal, we can depend on him to ensure that the sign we naturally believe to have superior power and authority will in fact be a “sure guide to Divine Revelation”¹⁹¹ in any matter that it is plausible God would want to inform us of.

It has been objected that if superior power is the marker that God uses to establish that miracles are divine, then Locke’s subjective definition of miracles seems to be beside the point.¹⁹² If God’s power is in fact “paramount to all,” and the signs of this power “will always be certain and unquestionable evidence that the Truth and Divine Mission is on that side on which they appear,” then God will never allow us to not be able to identify a divine event as a miracle. If this is Locke’s view, then the subjective definition of miracles is of no ultimate import. Superior power will always correctly direct us, and so there is no place for the experience of a miraculous event to be subjective.

The response to this objection is that there is nothing in Locke’s account that demands that we take the effects of superior power to be works of God rather than natural occurrences that accidentally happen to verify some revealed message. God may want to tell us important things that we cannot learn without revelation. He may have no other way to do this than by using miracles to establish that he is the one who is speaking to us. We may therefore have every reason to believe that miracles will have occurred, that they will have occurred earlier rather than later (so as not to deprive earlier generations of the message) and that God will not have allowed a rival to produce an event that verifies a message contrary to one he wishes to give. But all of this notwithstanding, there is nothing that prevents human beings considering the most miraculous of events as merely the product of heretofore unrecognized natural causes, accidentally appearing to confirm a touted divine message.

¹⁹⁰ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 227-228.

¹⁹¹ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 66-67 places these three points in a somewhat different context.

¹⁹² Mooney and Imbrosciano, “Curious Case,” 159-160.

This aspect of Locke's account can be shown in a starker light by contrasting Locke's account with Hoadly's. Hoadly also claimed that superior power is the best way to establish when an event is caused by God rather than by a less powerful created being. In fact, we may think that Hoadly's account is superior to Locke's on this point because he explained—in response to Fleetwood—how we can establish that one miracle is stronger than another, and why we should take the greater number of miracles to signify God's presence. These are claims that Locke accepted without argument. Both Hoadly and Locke considered superior power to answer to the question, “By what mark can we identify that a wondrous event is divine?” But Locke was responding to Hoadly, and the biggest difference between his account and Hoadly's is Locke's subjective definition of a miracle. This suggests that Locke's subjective definition must have added something important to his account of miracles, and it does.

Defining miracles subjectively allowed Locke to account for what happens when a person doesn't accept that a miracle has taken place. Locke expanded on this very point. On an account that uses superior power as the ultimate marker of the divine—as we see with Hoadly—it is hard to explain why some people didn't (and don't) accept the miracles of Moses and Jesus. In contrast, immediately after identifying superior power as a mark of divinity, Locke went on to explain how people can fail to recognize it as such. He began by pointing out that people do not have the ability to precisely determine, “what is, or is not above the force of any created being; or what Operations can be perform'd by none but a Divine Power, and require the immediate Hand of the Almighty.”¹⁹³ This is the reason that Locke gave for the “Unbelief of the *Jews*.” The Jews didn't accept Jesus's miracles because they didn't “see the Power and Presence of God in those many Miracles he did, which were greater than ever any other Man had done.”¹⁹⁴ The last clause cuts against the notion that Locke thought that superior power directs us absolutely toward divine miracles. He pointed to an example where this is not the case, in spite of the miracles' superior power.

¹⁹³ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 228.

¹⁹⁴ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 228-229.

Locke was interested in establishing that while superior power is a marker of the divine origin of a miracle, it is not an absolute marker that will always compel us to believe. That this was his view might seem a little hard to square with claims such as that the deliverer of a divine message “cannot be refus’d belief if he vouches his Mission by a Miracle,”¹⁹⁵ and, “where the Miracle is admitted, the Doctrine cannot be rejected . . .”¹⁹⁶ However, this apparent tension arises because Locke is presenting a counterfactual conditional. If a miracle is admitted, then the doctrine cannot be rejected. But, we can’t know the antecedent. We can only believe it on the basis of probabilities. And probabilities do not compel belief and may always be doubted or contested, perhaps unwisely, but not always improperly.¹⁹⁷ I expand on this in the second part of this chapter.

Following his discussion of the unbelief of the Jews, Locke pointed to another area where the flexibility of the subjective definition of miracle functions as a strength rather than a weakness. His definition allows people to be able to *believe* that an event is miraculous even if they don’t *know* that the event is contrary to a law of nature, or beyond the power of all created beings.

For Miracles being the Basis on which divine Mission is always establish’d, and consequently that Foundation on which the Believers of any divine Revelation must ultimately bottom their Faith, this use of them would be lost, if not to all Mankind, yet at least to the simple and illiterate (which is the far greatest part) if Miracles be desin’d to be none but such divine Operations as are in themselves beyond the power of all created Beings, or at least Operations contrary to the fix’d and establish’d Laws of Nature.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 221.

¹⁹⁶ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 222.

¹⁹⁷ *E IV.xvi.1-4*.

¹⁹⁸ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 230.

If we had to know that a miracle broke a law of nature, or that it was above the power of all created beings we would have a problem. Only philosophers could know for sure when a law of nature is broken, and even then they might not be absolutely sure. In addition, no one really knows the range of power of created beings. But it is important for any definition of miracle to be accessible to an ordinary person. Locke's way to do this was through the subjective definition which makes a miracle a matter of belief about an event rather than a matter of knowledge.

Fleetwood thought that we are all well enough acquainted with the laws of nature to know when they are broken. This is a claim that Locke rejected from the outset of *A Discourse on Miracles*. In the passage just cited, he observed that the only people who might be familiar enough with the laws of nature to know for sure when they are broken are philosophers. Although this would be good for the job security of philosophers, it would deny ordinary people any ability to decide whether they have been confronted with a miracle.

Similarly, on Hoadly's account we need to be able to establish when God performed a miraculous event. This in turn requires being able to identify evidence of superior power. Hoadly depended on God to ensure that we can do so, writing that, "because He *can*, therefor I'm sure He *Will*."¹⁹⁹ Locke's response was to point out that we cannot know the power difference between created beings and God well enough to be able to certainly establish when an event is beyond the natural power of a created being. However, because we know that God is all powerful, and that he won't mislead us, we can use superior power as a defeasible indicator of divinity. If we suppose that a miracle has been performed, then if this miracle is apparently greater than any rival miracle, we can accept the message it is offered to authenticate in good conscience, thinking we have done our duty by God, who would have prevented a mistake in such a case rather than allow us to fall into it honestly to our own damnation. But others may well find that the evidence for a supernatural cause of the greatest purported miracles is inadequate (and so, necessarily,

¹⁹⁹ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 14.

is the evidence for any lesser rivals). Such individuals might have to struggle with reasons that (according to Locke) put us in a position to demonstrate that God exists, and would want to tell us about important things that we cannot know any other way, and would have needed to perform miracles early in history in order to do so.²⁰⁰ They would also have to contend with the purportedly lucky circumstance that only the Christian and Jewish religions pretend to miracles and those miracles support compatible revelations (at least from the Christian perspective). But, perhaps God has no important messages to deliver to us, or none that he considered us to be incapable of discovering by unaided reason. Locke would of course never have said such a thing. But he seems to have been careful to leave the option open even so.

Curiously, the view that many commentators attribute to Locke is actually much closer to the view that Hoadly held.

2.2 Locke's *Essay*

Locke defined knowledge at the beginning of the fourth book of the *Essay*. Maintaining that the mind only has its own ideas as its objects, Locke concluded that, “Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.*”²⁰¹ After the main forms that knowledge takes (intuition, demonstration, and sensation) and the most important things that we can know (notably that God exists and what the principles of morality are), he moved on to consider how we handle situations where we cannot properly be said to have knowledge.

Locke pointed out that if all we had as a guide was “the certainty of true *knowledge*” we would be “utterly in the dark” when it came to most of our daily actions. “He that will not eat, till he has demonstration that it will nourish him; he that will not stir, till he infallibly

²⁰⁰ *E* IV.x and *E* IV.xvi.

²⁰¹ *E* IV.i.2.

knows the business he goes about will succeed, will have little else to do, but sit still and perish.”²⁰²

The faculty that God has given us in order to help with the shortcomings in our ability to obtain knowledge is judgment. We achieve knowledge when the mind “certainly perceives, and is undoubtedly satisfied” by the agreement or disagreement between ideas. Judgment on the other hand allows the mind to proceed when “certain Agreement or Disagreement is not perceived, but *presumed*.” When the mind presumes two ideas to agree or disagree and they do so agree or disagree in the world, this is called “right *Judgment*.”²⁰³

Judgment is related to probability insofar as it arises from a “presumed” agreement and disagreement of ideas. Whereas demonstration establishes an actual agreement or disagreement between two ideas, probability is the appearance of agreement or disagreement between two ideas.

As Demonstration is the shewing the Agreement, or Disagreement of two *Ideas*, by the intervention of one or more Proofs, which have a constant, immutable, and visible connexion one with another: so *Probability* is nothing but the appearance of such an Agreement, or Disagreement, by the intervention of Proofs, whose connexion is not constant and immutable, or at least is not perceived to be so, but is, or appears for the most part to be so, and is enough to induce the Mind to *judge* the Proposition to be true, or false, rather than the contrary.²⁰⁴

When a person carefully works through the proof that shows that the three angles in a triangle are equal to two right angles, she has certain knowledge that the three angles in a triangle are equal to two right angles. This certain knowledge follows from perceiving the “certain immutable connexion” of equality between the angles in the triangle, and each

²⁰² E IV.xiv.1.

²⁰³ E IV.xiv.4.

²⁰⁴ E IV.xv.1.

intermediate step of the proof, until it concludes. In contrast, when a person accepts that the angles in a triangle are equal to two right angles based on his trust in a mathematician, his assent is based on a foundation that usually presents us with the true relation between the ideas, but that experience teaches us can sometimes fail to do so.

Probability rests on two “extraneous” conditions, analogy with past sensory experience of a relation between ideas, and the quality of testimony to a relation between ideas. (A judgment can be based either one in the absence of the other, though both can figure in some cases.)

[I]n all the parts of Knowledge, there is intuition; each immediate *Idea*, each step has its visible and certain connexion; in belief not so. That which makes me believe, is something extraneous to the thing I believe; something not evidently joined on both sides to, and so not manifestly shewing the Agreement, or Disagreement of those *Ideas*, that are under consideration.²⁰⁵

The person who believes that the three angles in a triangle are equal to two right angles because of their trust in the mathematician believes in the truth of this proposition because of something “extraneous” to the ideas that are connected in the proposition. Testimony is “not evidently joined on both sides” to the idea of a triangle and the idea of two right angles. If it were, it could never be false.

Locke identified six considerations affecting the quality of testimony, “ I. The Number. 2. The Integrity. 3. The Skill of the Witnesses. 4. The Design of the Author, where it is a Testimony out of a Book cited. 5. The Consistency of the Parts, and Circumstances of the Relation. 6. Contrary Testimonies.”²⁰⁶ This list was not intended to be exhaustive. The

²⁰⁵ *E IV.xv.3.*

²⁰⁶ *E IV.xv.4*; Burns, *The Great Debate*, 60 claims that this is the first time where assessing the probability of the reports of others should take into account not only the reliability of the witness, but also the intrinsic likelihood of the events related.

point was to identify some of the things we consider when establishing the value of the testimony of others.²⁰⁷

Though analogy with past experience and testimony do not establish the certainty of a relation between ideas (past sensory experience does not assure us that the relation continues into the present, testimony can be the product of error or deceit), they often serve just as well.

Our Knowledge, as has been shewn, being very narrow, and we not happy enough to find certain Truth in every thing which we have occasion to consider; most of the Propositions we think, reason, discourse, nay act upon, are such, as we cannot have undoubted Knowledge of their Truth: yet some of them border so near upon Certainty, that we make no doubt at all about them; but *assent* to them as firmly, and act, according to that Assent, as resolutely, as if they were infallibly demonstrated, and that our Knowledge of them was perfect and certain.²⁰⁸

There are some things that analogy to past experience and testimony convince us of so strongly that we assent to them as if they were “Infallibly demonstrated.” Others are less so, producing various degrees of assent. This establishes the difference between knowledge and probability, certainty and faith.

How certain we are of a judgment depends on how fully we have investigated the various grounds of its probability in analogy to experience and testimony.

Probability wanting that intuitive Evidence, which infallibly determines the Understanding, and produces certain Knowledge, *the Mind if it will proceed rationally, ought to examine all the grounds of Probability*, and see how they make more or less, *for or against* any probable Proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it, and upon a due balancing the whole, reject, or receive it, with a

²⁰⁷ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 60-61 reads this as a much more robust account of the considerations of testimony.

²⁰⁸ *E IV.xv.2.*

more or less firm assent, proportionably to the preponderancy of the greater grounds of Probability on one side or the other.²⁰⁹

For example, if I see someone walk on ice, I have knowledge (by sensation) that this person walked on ice. If, on the other hand someone tells me that they saw a person in England walking on ice in the middle of winter, in most cases, I will assent to this proposition, believe it, and treat it like it is true. I assent to both because of analogy with past experience (I have experienced many long cold winters and I know that water freezes in the cold to the point where it will bear the weight of a human being), but also because of my assessment of the capacity and integrity of the witness, of the confirmation of independent witnesses, and of other such factors. If the person telling me this story has something to gain from me believing it when it is not true, or I have found them to not be trustworthy in the past, my inclination to assent is diminished. But, if it doesn't seem like they have anything to gain from lying, and I find them generally trustworthy, I will assent to the proposition and accept it as probably true with a degree of conviction approaching certainty.

We can imagine the same story being told to a person who grew up in, and has never left the tropics. Because this person has never experienced water freezing to form ice, it is not consistent with their experience that water can freeze. For this person, the same testimony that I would find entirely convincing would be unconvincing, not because the quality of the testimony is any different for the other person, but instead because the event reported not only bears no analogy to anything in their past experience but is directly contrary to all their past experience.

And as it happened to a *Dutch* Ambassador, who entertaining the King of *Siam* with the particularities of *Holland*, which he was inquisitive after, amongst other things told him, that the Water in his Country, would sometimes, in cold weather, be so hard, that Men walked upon it, and that it would bear an Elephant, if he were there. To which the King replied, *Hitherto I have believed the strange*

²⁰⁹ E IV.xv.5.

Things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man, but now I am sure you lye. (E IV.xv.5)

This example is famous in the early modern analysis of miracles. It was later be used by Joseph Butler in the *Analogy of Religion* (1736), as well as Thomas Sherlock, Peter Annet, and David Hume—in the second and subsequent editions of “Of Miracles.”²¹⁰ This later history seems to have led some commentators to think that the case can be used to give us some insight into Locke’s views on miracles.²¹¹ However, for Locke miracles are a special case, where the normal rules of evidence do not apply.²¹² In the case of a miraculous event, the less consistent the event is with our experience, the better it is for establishing that the miraculous event has taken place. Had the Dutch Ambassador instead been citing evidence for the resurrection of Christ as a reason for the King of Siam to accept the New Testament as the revealed word of God, the case would not have been so straightforward. I return to this topic momentarily.

While Locke maintained that how certain we are of a judgment depends on how fully we have investigated the various grounds of its probability he was far from maintaining that this obligates us to investigate probabilities to the bottom before reaching a judgment. In many cases, our assent to a belief or opinion isn’t from “an actual view of the Reasons” but instead comes from our memory of a past conclusion that we have previously drawn, uninformed by the premises for that conclusion, which we have forgotten. Even should we remember the premises, we can’t always hold all of the steps of the proofs we used to come to our decisions in mind. Recognizing that it would be too much to expect that people constantly renew the original investigation that lead them to their conclusions, Locke maintained that as long as people have run through the proof for a particular

²¹⁰ For an extended historical discussion of the use of this argument see Loyd F. Bitzer “The ‘Indian Prince’ in Miracle Arguments of Hume and His Predecessors and Early Critics,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol 31, No. 3, 1998, 175-230; Burns, *The Great Debate*, 61 also mentions some of the later uses of this example.

²¹¹ See for example, Mooney and Imbrosciano, “Curious Case,” 158 and 160. They seem to miss that for Locke miracles form a special case.

²¹² Burns, *The Great Debate*, 61, contrasts Locke’s position on this case with Hume’s.

judgments before, they hold the conclusion of this proof in their memory, and they “remain satisfied with the Testimony of their Memories, that this is the Opinion, that by the Proofs that they have once seen of it, deserves such a degree of their *Assent*”²¹³ they are justified in continuing to accord that degree of assent to that judgment.

It is unavoidable therefore, that the Memory be relied on in the case, and that *Men be perswaded of several Opinions, whereof the Proofs are not actually in their Thoughts*; nay, which perhaps they are not able actually to re-call. Without this, the greatest part of Men must be either very Scepticks, or change every Moment, and yield themselves up to whoever, having lately studied the Question, offers them Arguments; which for want of Memory, they are not able presently to answer.²¹⁴

One important implication of this analysis is that when different people have different senses of what the laws of nature are, and hence make different estimates of whether an event is a miracle, they cannot justly be expected to either be able to justify their judgment by supplying the evidence for it, or abandon themselves to the view of another person who presents an argument for the opposed judgment. This is the conclusion Locke drew in the *Discourse on Miracles*. Part of the reason for it is given here. Locke observed that sticking to past judgments is often “the cause of great obstinacy in Error and Mistake.”²¹⁵ However, he was careful to point out that the problem does not come from depending on our memories. We can only be condemned for persisting in our judgments in cases where we reached our conclusions before having properly, or completely examined the matter. Someone who has once looked into the matter to the bottom is entitled to persist in their opinion, even if they no longer remember exactly what led them to it. Not only that, but they are not even obliged to review their opinion if new evidence comes in. Locke gave two reasons why not. One is that new evidence is always coming in, and there is so much of it that we can’t reasonably be expected to keep up with it. The

²¹³ *E IV.xvi.1.*

²¹⁴ *E IV.xvi.2.*

²¹⁵ *E IV.xvi.3.*

other is that as new evidence piles on old, the conclusion tends to flip back and forth like a weather vane in the wind. But people need to be relied upon, and they could not be relied upon if their opinions were constantly changing with each new survey of the evidence. In cases of knowledge, our obligations are not the same because what is known is certain and can't be overturned. However, with probability, "'tis not in every case we can be sure, that we have all the Particulars before us, that any way concern the Question" so it is always possible that given new information what we previously believed could be overturned.

And yet we are forced to determine our selves on the one side or other. The conduct of our Lives, and the management of our great Concerns, will not bear delay: for those depend, for the most part, on the determination of our Judgment in points, wherein we are not capable of certain and demonstrative Knowledge, and wherein it is necessary for us to embrace the one side, or the other.²¹⁶

Because of these conditions, Locke went on to suggest that we should maintain peace and friendship when confronted with a diversity of opinions. We cannot reasonably expect people to give up their own opinions and to embrace ours in an act of "blind resignation to an Authority."²¹⁷ If the person that you are interacting with sticks by his previously well-considered judgments on trust, we shouldn't expect him to give up his judgment in favor of ours, lest we set a precedent for him to exercise a like violence on us.

We should do well to commiserate our mutual Ignorance, and endeavor to remove it in all the gentle and fair ways of Information; and not instantly treat others ill, as obstinate and perverse, because they will not renounce their own, and receive our Opinions, or at least those we would force upon them, when 'tis more than probable, that we are no less obstinate in not embracing some of theirs. For where is the Man, that has uncontestable Evidence of the Truth of all that he holds, or of

²¹⁶ *E IV.xvi.3.*

²¹⁷ *E IV.xvi.4.*

the Falshood of all he condemns' or can say, that he has examined, to the bottom, all his own, or other Men's Opinions?²¹⁸

There are very few people who have “got past all doubt in the Doctrines they profess”²¹⁹ and they tend to be the ones least interested in swaying others to accept their beliefs. “And there is good reason to think,” Locke concludes, “that if Men were better instructed themselves, they would be less imposing on others.”²²⁰

Supposing we have once fully examined a matter to the bottom, our examination will result in a belief that varies in strength, depending on the probability our investigation reveals. Locke found it useful to identify a few specific grades of assent. He connected these grades of assent to the two grounds of probability; analogy to past experience and the testimony of others. He organized the grades of assent by the extent to which we find these grounds have been satisfied.

Locke called the highest degree of assent “Assurance.”²²¹ We have assurance about a proposition when it is consistent with the current observation and past experience both of ourselves and of everyone else we know of. So, what is assured is what is supported by both of the grounds of probability to the fullest extent possible. The analogy with past experience is uniform and perfect, and the testimony is likewise exceptionless and of the highest quality. We may reason and act on this type of proposition as if it were certain knowledge. Supposing that “all *English*-men, who have occasion to mention it, should affirm, that it froze in *England* the last Winter, or that there were Swallows seen there in the Summer”²²² and that we ourselves have never seen any otherwise, we will have “as little doubt of it, as that Seven and Four are Eleven.” These types of probabilities “rise so near to *Certainty*, that they govern our Thoughts as absolutely, and influence all our

²¹⁸ *E* IV.xvi.4.

²¹⁹ *E* IV.xvi.4.

²²⁰ *E* IV.xvi.4.

²²¹ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 62-63 gives a somewhat different account.

²²² *E* IV.xvi.6.

Actions as full, as the most evident demonstration.” Because of this, there is “little or no difference between them and certain Knowledge.”

Locke called the second degree of assent “confidence.” This degree comes up in cases where the testimony is still as perfect as it is with cases of assurance, but the matter testified to is one that has not always turned out that way in the past. Locke gave the example of the proposition that people prefer their own private advantage to public advantage. Given this general experience, when a historian writes that Tiberius did something that prefers his private advantage over the advantage of the public, given our experience of this type of thing, this reported history is extremely probable. It is only extremely probable however and not certain. Although experience shows us that most people prefer their own advantage over the advantage of the public, we know of cases to the contrary. For Locke, this means that regardless of how many historians testify to the fact or of how reputable they are, we can only be extremely confident of the historians’ account of Tiberius.²²³

When things are as likely to happen a certain way as not but are still “vouched by the concurrent Testimony of unsuspecting witnesses,” our assent is also unavoidable. Locke was thinking of events that could as likely turn out one way as the opposite way, or, as he put it, situations when, “in the nature of the thing, there be nothing for, nor against it.”²²⁴ He mentioned someone claiming, “that a bird should fly this or that way,” or that “it should thunder on a Man’s right or left Hand,” or “That there is such a City in *Italy* as *Rome*: That about 1700 years ago, there lived in it a Man, called *Julius Caesar*; that he was a General, and that he won a Battle against another called *Pompey*.”²²⁵ The degree of our assent to these types of propositions comes from, their being related by people of credit, their not being contradicted by other people of credit, and their being the sort of things that analogy with our own experience tells us could well happen. Because one

²²³ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 63-64 claims that this distinction does not carry the weight that Locke requires. I admit that I don’t quite understand his point here.

²²⁴ E IV.xvi.8.

²²⁵ E IV.xvi.8.

outcome is as likely as the other we assent to these propositions on the strength of the testimony.²²⁶ Locke said of this degree of assent that a person “cannot avoid believing it, and can as little doubt of it, as he does of the Being and Actions of his own Acquaintance, whereof he himself is a Witness.”²²⁷

Judgments are more difficult in situations when testimony contradicts experience, or when there are different testimonies that conflict with each other. In these situations “Diligence, Attention, and Exactness” are required if we ever hope to form a right judgment and “proportion the *Assent* to the different Evidence and Probability” that the situation requires. There is such a wide variety of “contrary Observations, Circumstance, Reports, different Qualifications, Tempers, Designs, Over-sights, etc.” of the people reporting testimony, and how each situation corresponds or doesn’t to our experience that it is impossible to establish precise rules. These degrees of assent go by a variety of names including “*Belief, Conjecture, Guess, Doubt, Wavering, Distrust, Disbelief, etc.*”²²⁸ This, however, is the context in which judgments of whether or not an event is a violation of a law of nature are made. Small wonder, therefore, that in the *Discourse* Locke was not inclined to take acquaintance to give us any uncontentious judgment concerning whether an event is miraculous.

In passing, Locke referenced a “Rule observed in the Law of England” about a copy of a document not being as good as the original document, which he took to underscore the conclusion “That any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has.”²²⁹ Locke defined “original Truth” as “the Being and Existence of the thing it self.” The idea is that a credible person using their knowledge to vouch for a proposition is a good proof. However, an equally credible person reporting what the first person told them makes the proof weaker. Similarly, a third person reporting what the second person told them, that the first person told *them* is weaker yet. So that, “the more

²²⁶ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 64 reads this passage somewhat differently than I do here.

²²⁷ E IV.xvi.8.

²²⁸ E IV.xvi.9.

²²⁹ E IV.xvi.10.

hands the Tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and evidence does it receive from them.”²³⁰ Locke contrasted this view with the view that Opinions gain force by getting older. On this view, propositions that begin “evidently false or doubtful enough” seem to gain credit through “an inverted Rule of Probability” so that they become more credible with time.

Locke did not mean to undercut the value of history. “I think nothing more valuable than the Records of Antiquity: I wish we had more of them, and more uncorrupted.” None the less he continued, “But this, Truth it self forces me to say, That no *Probability* can arise higher than its Original.” The farther that we get away from the original experience of our testimony to something the less reliable the copy becomes, due to the possibility of copy error or deliberate misrepresentation. “But the farther still it is from the Original, the less valid it is, and has always less force in the mouth, or writing of him that last made use of it, that in his from whom he received it.”²³¹

Locke considered things that are beyond the reach of our senses or of anyone’s testimony, living or dead, to nonetheless be matters about which we might make judgments. He divided these things into two groups. The first group includes “finite immaterial Beings,” such as “Spirits, Angels, Devils, etc.” This group also includes material beings that are either too small for us to see, or are so far away from us that we can’t see them. The second group also includes the insensible causes of sensible effects, such as the loadstone attracting iron and a candle melting and continuing to burn while producing light and heat. In these cases the only thing that we have to direct our belief is a degree of analogy. For example, we know from our experience that when we quickly rub two sticks together it causes heat and will often cause fire. From this experience we have reason to think that heat and fire “consists in a violent agitation of the imperceptible minute parts of the burning matter,” even though the moving particles are too small to see.

²³⁰ E IV.xvi.10.

²³¹ E IV.xvi.11.

Locke maintained that in all of the sensible parts of creation the species of things are not sharply separated from one another but instead grade off into one another through intermediate species. Between horses and donkeys there are mules. Between monkeys and humans there are apes. Between fish and birds there are flying fish, and so on. If we consider all of the different types of things in the world, it is hard to establish exactly where beings begin to be sensible and rational or where they stop being insensible and irrational. Another similar example is the exact point between the last natural being that should be considered alive, and the first thing that doesn't have life. Locke compared what he has in mind to a cone. There is regular progress toward the tip, there is also a wide flat end but there are no sharp distinctions between the two ends. Given this model of the way that things are in the sensible world, Locke suggested that, using analogy, it may be probable to suppose that this model extends to finite immaterial beings. This would mean that there are "several ranks of intelligent Beings, excelling us in several degrees of Perfection" continuing upward until the "infinite Perfection of the Creator." Returning to the model of the cone, our creator is at the tip, below this are finite immaterial beings, below this are humans which are intelligent finite material beings, below this are animals, and so on. So, using analogy we can move from what we do have knowledge about—in this case the lack of any sharp gradation between species of finite material beings—to make a claim about finite immaterial beings beyond our experience.

This last example is of course behind Locke's claim in the *Discourse* that an event that one person takes to be miraculous may be taken by another to be the work of a finite being of a species intermediate between ourselves and God, who is working entirely within the bounds of natural laws, but is so much more advanced than we are that its acts appear as miraculous to us as ours appear to more limited beings.

I mentioned earlier that the case of miracles is an exception to everything else that Locke had to say on this topic. I close this section by considering what he had to say about them and about the related form of probabilistic belief he called faith. Whereas in all other cases the disanalogy of an event to our past experience would be a reason for diminished confidence in the proposition that the event actually occurred, Locke maintained that in the case of a miracle, "the strangeness of the Fact lessens not the Assent to a fair

Testimony given of it.”²³² In fact, the more contrary the event is to our normal experience the better it is for serving the purpose of a miracle.

For where such supernatural Events are suitable to ends aim’d at by him, who has the Power to change the course of Nature, there under such Circumstances, they may be the fitter to procure Belief, by how much more they are beyond, or contrary to ordinary Observation.²³³

Locke’s reference to situations that require supernatural events in order to be suitable to God’s aims, was a reference to the need God would have to prove his identity to those to whom he appears or those whom he inspires. In *Essay* IV.10 Locke had argued that God, understood as a most powerful and most knowing being, must exist. Supposing this being is benevolently disposed towards us, it would be concerned to inform us of things that are important for us to know but that we could not learn on our own, such as that there will be an afterlife were the just will be rewarded and the unjust damned. But God couldn’t just show up one day and say this to us. Our reply would be, “who are you to tell us these things?” This is in fact what Moses asked when God attempted to deliver a message to him. Neither could he inwardly inspire someone to think of his message. Their reaction would be “what did I have for dinner that gave me that bad dream?” or, more charitably, “what assures me that this revelation came from God?” To answer the question, God would need to give some evidence that he is the most powerful and wise being. The best way to do that would be with a demonstration of his supreme power. This is where miracles come in. They serve as signs of the presence of God. When Moses sees the bush burn without being consumed, he has reason to think that it really is God who is speaking. When the inspired person wakes up and sees a July snowfall, they have reason to think this was not just a bad dream. God’s purpose in performing miracles is to demonstrate his presence, so that we will acknowledge his message as coming from the most wise and powerful being.

²³² Burns, *The Great Debate*, 65 makes a similar point.

²³³ E IV.xvi.13.

Locke's point was that, given that it is demonstrable that God exists and would have had this purpose, we can have all the assurance that a demonstration can provide that miracles must have occurred (God would not have waited to deliver a message of any importance). The only question is which events were those miracles. In this case, therefore, testimony to an extraordinary event ought not to diminish our confidence because we have every reason to expect that this sort of extraordinary event, one worked for the purpose of demonstrating that God is speaking (or that a prophet is speaking with God's permission) would exist.

Miraculous events work against the ordinary grounds of probability. The event needs to take place in a context where a sign required in order to establish a revealed message is being delivered with divine authority.²³⁴ In addition, details about who is performing the miracle, and what doctrine the miracle is performed in support of are also important. Supporting an elephant on water is not a context where revelation is being authenticated. Even if the King of Siam were to see an elephant standing on a frozen lake, although it would be completely contrary to his experience, it would not count as a miracle because it does not serve the right purpose. Because the event is not taking place in a situation that is suitable to ends aimed at by God, a miracle should not be expected. Locke expanded on this point in *A Discourse of Miracles* when arguing that there are actually very few miracles that are involved in revelation. We should only expect a miracle in situations where a supernatural event is suitable for God's aim. It is only in these situations that we reverse our commitment to past experience when establishing the grounds of probability. This dramatically reduces the number of miracles that the account is interested in considering. The reversal in the application of experience to probability judgments only comes up in very particular situations.

Locke's position on miracles is connected with his account of revelation, which he presented as the testimony of a witness who would not lie and cannot be deceived (God)

²³⁴ Burns, *The Great Debate*, 65 discusses the importance of context here. This view eases the concern about how our assent can be rational based on the credit of the proposer that is raised by Mooney and Imbrosciano, "Curious Case," 154.

and so as testimony that ought, in principle to command a degree of assent (called “faith”) of the highest order, equaling the force of a demonstration²³⁵ “ the Testimony ... of such an one, as cannot deceive, nor be deceived, and that is of God himself... carries with it Assurance beyond Doubt, Evidence beyond Exception.”²³⁶ Faith would be “a settled and sure Principle of Assent and Assurance [that] leaves no manner of room for Doubt or Hesitation,”²³⁷ but for two things. We need to know that the person delivering the revealed message really is God or a prophet speaking on God’s authority. And we need to know that we have interpreted the message correctly. According to Locke, we cannot know either of these things. They are matters of probability, and we can at best have assurance of them. More likely, given the difficulty of determining whether laws of nature have been broken and the problem with corruption of messages that have been transmitted through successive copyists, we can only have a lesser degree of confidence in these matters. Faith may be “a settled and sure Principle of Assent and Assurance [that] leaves no manner of room for Doubt or Hesitation,” but there is an important rider attached to this claim:

Only we must be sure, that it be a divine Revelation, and that we understand it right: else we shall expose our selves to all the Extravagancy of Enthusiasm, and all the Error of wrong Principles, if we have Faith and Assurance in what is not divine Revelation. And therefore in those Cases, our assent can be rationally no higher than the Evidence of its being a Revelation, and that this is the meaning of the Expressions it is delivered in. If the Evidence of its being a Revelation, or that this its true Sense be only on probable Proofs, our Assent can reach no higher than an Assurance or Diffidence, arising from the more, or less apparent Probability of the Proofs.²³⁸

²³⁵ IV.xvi.14.

²³⁶ IV.xvi.14.

²³⁷ E IV.xvi.14.

²³⁸ E IV.xvi.14.

This is an analogous slide to one that Locke made in the *Discourse* when discussing our inability to refuse belief when a revealed message is vouched for by a miracle. Locke there made what might on the surface look like a very strong claim. “I crave leave to say that he who comes with a Message from God to be deliver’d to the World, cannot be refus’d belief if he vouches his Mission by a Miracle, because his credentials have a right to it.”²³⁹ But the apparently strong claim is a conditional, and it turns out that its antecedent is very hard to establish, rendering the consequent equally tenuous. A similar move is made in the *Essay*. The careless reader can come away thinking that Locke maintained that faith commands out assent.²⁴⁰ But it turns out that faith, which in principle ought to equal the force of a demonstration, in fact struggles to supply us with a lesser degree of confidence, due to the difficulty of ascertaining whether the message has in fact come from God and has been correctly recorded and transmitted. A counterfactual conditional is at work in this case as well. Our faith *would* absolutely determine our minds and exclude all wavering as our knowledge itself *if we could* know that a revealed message in fact came from God, and *if we could* know that this message had been correctly understood. But, *we can’t know* either of these things. Because of this, “our assent [to revelation] can be rationally no higher than the evidence of it being a revelation.” This leaves us with—at best—assurance in the case of believing the revealed message comes from God and confidence that we interpret this message correctly. This is however not certainty.

To know that a message has come from God, we must know that a miracle has been performed. But it is clear that for Locke we can only have a belief that a miracle has occurred and can never have knowledge of it. This has ramifications for revelation.

²³⁹ Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, 221.

²⁴⁰ Houston, *Reported Miracles*, 48 points to a tension between Locke’s claim that our faith “absolutely determines our Minds” and also “excludes all wavering as our Knowledge it self,” and his claim that “our assent [to revelation] can be rationally no higher than the evidence of its being a revelation.” But Locke’s claim that Faith would be “a settled and sure Principle of Assent and Assurance [that] leaves no manner of room for Doubt or Hesitation,” is immediately followed by the qualification, “Only we must be sure, that it be a divine Revelation, and that we understand it right: else we shall expose our selves to all the Extravagancy of Enthusiasm, and all the Error of wrong Principles.” There is no tension here, only the presentation of a carefully limited claim.

Though revelation is a message from a messenger who cannot deceive and would not lie, and so ought to provide certainty, we need to judge that the messenger is in fact speaking with divine authority. This requires the performance of miracles, so revelation ends up depending on miracles and degrades to the level of belief because we can never have more than belief that a miracle has occurred.

The subjective definition of miracle that Locke offered in *A Discourse of Miracles* does not come up in the *Essay*. Some commentators point to this as evidence that the two accounts are incompatible.²⁴¹ But the subjective account follows from the *Essay*'s ultimately skeptical positions on miracles and faith. While we may be able to demonstrate that miracles must occur, we can at best have assurance which events are miracles, because we can at best have assurance what the laws of nature are. And while the testimony of a witness who cannot be deceived and would not lie may be as good as a demonstration, we can at best have assurance that any given witness is such a person, because proving it requires performing miracles. And we can at best only be confident that the message has been correctly recorded and transmitted. Assurance and confidence are forms of belief, not knowledge, and for Locke all beliefs are subjective. Beliefs are based on our own experience as well as our personal appraisal of each example of testimony in favor or against the belief. Given this, we should not be surprised that our beliefs about miracles and revelation are also subjective.

The subjective definition at least allows us to form the belief that a miracle has occurred rather than define miracles in a way that sets such a high standard that we can never have any confidence that a miracle has occurred (as on traditional readings of Hume's account of miracles). Locke's account also implies that, given the right set of conditions, we can be encouraged to change our beliefs about revealed messages from God. Faith in revealed religion is moved from the realm of certain doctrine to that of reasoned debate, and as no option in the debate is foreclosed, all are tolerated.

²⁴¹ Mooney and Imbrosciano, "Curious Case," 161; Houston, *Reported Miracles*, 42-43.

When the *Essay* is read on its own, apart from reference to unpublished writings such as the *Discourse*, it can easily be taken to paint a much more positive picture, one according to which we can be assured that God must have performed miracles as part of revealing important messages to the first humans, so that our only task is to look to history for the most likely candidates, which turn out to be the compatible miracles of Moses and Jesus, resolving the issue with little room for doubt or hesitation. Locke was a careful writer, particularly on religious matters, where he wanted to keep clear of all charges of heresy. His unpublished writings bring out the skeptical themes implicit in the religious epistemology of the *Essay* more clearly. In addition to the *Discourse*, Locke also discussed the shortcomings of revealed religion in his journals. A journal entry from April 3rd, 1681 claims, unsurprisingly enough, that the only way that we can know that there is a God is using reason. However, Locke went on to express less optimism about our other methods for discovering information about God.

For what ever discoverys we receive any other way must come originally from inspiration which is an opinion in or perswaion of the minde whereof a man knows not the rise nor reason, but is received there as a truth comeing from an unknown and therefor a supernatural cause, and not founded upon those principles nor observations nor the way of reasoning which makes the understanding admit other things for truths.²⁴²

Classic cases of inspiration are reading an obscure passage in the Bible and suddenly experiencing a conviction of its meaning that comes as if the dark page had been illuminated by a bright light, or feeling driven to write a book by an inner voice or a compulsion that seems other-worldly. This is to be distinguished from cases where an angel or a prophet or someone claiming to be God himself appears before our eyes and dictates a book or a set of laws to a so-called “inspired” writer. The writers and interpreters of the gospels were presumably inspired in the former way, Moses and Mohammed in the later. While the later involves apparent sense experience (perhaps as

²⁴² R.I. Aaron and Jocelyn Gibb. *An Early Draft of Locke's Essay together with excerpts from his journals*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936, 114.

good as any other sensory experience) is it still sensory experience of someone claiming in their own right to be inspired (or to be God, which can be considered to be the minimal proximity case between the inspired speaker and the inspiring agent). Either way, we cannot get away from inspiration and Locke's observation that there is a distinction between things that we learn from inspiration and those that we learn from observation and reasoning. As in the *Essay*, Locke argued that we cannot accept anything that follows from inspiration unless it is conformable to reason.

But noe such inspiration concerning god or his worship can be admitted for truth by him that thinkes him self thus inspired, much lesse by any other whom he would perswade to believe him inspired any farther then it is conformable to his reason.²⁴³

Without reason we can't know the difference between "inspiration and phansy; truth, and error" so setting reason aside when it conflicts with inspiration would be tantamount to setting aside the guide we need to determine whether there is any inspiration. This is a point also found in the *Essay*. But in the journals, Locke also argues that God would not put us in a position where all of our regular knowledge comes to us using reason, but all of our knowledge of God comes from a less reliable source.

But alsoe it is impossible to have such a notion of god as to believe that he should make a creature to whom the knowledg of himself was necessary and yet not to be discovered by that way which discovers every thing els that concernes us but was to come into the mindes of men only by such a way by which all manner of errors come in and is more likely to let in falshoods then truths, since noe body can doubt from the contradiction and strangenesse of opinions concerning god and religion in the world that men are likely to have more phansys then inspirations.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Aaron and Gibb, *An Early Draft*, 114.

²⁴⁴ Aaron and Gibb, *An Early Draft*, 114.

Following from these concerns about the consistency of what we can receive from inspiration, Locke continued, “Inspiration then barely in it self cannot be a ground to receive any doctrine not conformable to reason.”

Locke also considered inspiration when it is accompanied by a miracle. He argued that even in this case it remains important to make reason primary. “In the next place let us see how far Inspiration can inforce on the minde any opinion concerning god or his worship when accompanied with a power to doe a miracle and here too I say the last determination must be that of reason.” Locke provided three reasons for thinking that this determination is unlikely to be positive.

The first is that we need reason in order to establish what is and what is not a miracle. But, even with reason, “not knowing how far the power of naturall causes doe extend them selves and what strange effects they may produce is very hard to determin.”²⁴⁵

Second, God wants us to use our naturally given faculties to discover the truth of things. Working miracles would undermine our natural faculties because they would be events that are contrary to our experience. This could lead us to turn to miracles as an explanation in any situation where we can’t find a natural explanation, stifling scientific progress. God would not want to do that. “Twill always be as great a miracle that god should alter the course of naturall things to overturne the principles of knowledg and understanding in a man . . . as the miracle it self.”²⁴⁶

Third, other agents likely exist who are intermediate between us and God in power. These agents could also work miracles, perhaps for diabolical purposes. We need a criterion to rule these miracles out. The only available criterion is the consistency of the message the miracle authenticates with scripture. But this is to argue in a circle. “And if inspiration have soe much the disadvantage of reason in the man himself who is inspired, it has much more soe in him who receives this revelation only from an other and that too very

²⁴⁵ Aaron and Gibb, *An Early Draft*, 115.

²⁴⁶ Aaron and Gibb, *An Early Draft*, 115.

remote in time and place.”²⁴⁷

As John Wright has observed, together, these reasons amount to a devastating condemnation of the likelihood that inspiration can be underwritten by miracles, one that is as profound, and more multi-faceted, than what is later found in Hume.²⁴⁸

Locke may of course have changed his mind about these matters after writing these journal entries, and they were in any case unknown to Whiston, Clarke, Collins, and others writing on revealed religion in the early 1700’s. It is even questionable how much of an impact the *Discourse*, which was only published by Collins in 1706 can have had on that debate. In the end, the most telling development in the late 17th century debate may have been the emergence of the self-reference problem. Even granting that an inspired writer could have good ground to believe that a miracle has occurred to prove that the inspiration came from God, if those living in later days find themselves in a situation where the only evidence for the occurrence of the miracle is testimony contained in the inspired writing itself, then the miracle is worthless, because later people have to deal with the possibility of forgery. As Collins put it, piling miracles into a building built on an unsound foundation will not make that foundation any stronger. This may be what prompted later writers to abandon the appeal to miracles and look for an independent justification of the Christian revelation in the prophetic writings of a rival religion, which could not be dismissed as Christian forgeries. However, the implicit skepticism of Locke’s treatment of revelation in the *Essay* at least indicates some of the considerations that might have arisen for later writers, and may in part help to account for their innovations.

²⁴⁷ Aaron and Gibb, *An Early Draft*, 115.

²⁴⁸ I owe all the observations made about Locke’s journal entries, and the direction to look at them, to John Wright, who spoke on these matters at a conference on Locke and Toleration held at the University of Western Ontario in June of 2017.

2.3 Conclusion

I began this chapter by considering a note at the end of Locke's *Discourse of Miracles*. In this note Locke expressed his concern about the definition of "miracle" used by William Fleetwood in *An Essay upon Miracles* and a letter responding to this written by Benjamin Hoadly. Fleetwood and Hoadly offered rival attempts to evade the circularity and establishment problems that I identified in the previous chapter. They did this by ensuring that we could know the source of a miracle was God. I argued that Fleetwood's system in particular falls prey to a more immediately question-begging version of the circularity problem that I call the "self-reference" problem. This problem arises when the occurrence of a miracle is not known by personal experience or independent historical testimony, but is itself among the revealed truths that the occurrence of that miracle is supposed to authenticate. As we will soon see, this is a problem that Collins and others will seize on.

Locke's reaction to these rival attempts in *A Discourse of Miracles*. There, Locke presents a subjective definition of miracles. On this definition in order for an event to be miraculous the spectator needs to consider the event incomprehensible and unnatural. This allowed the possibility that what is a miracle for one person might not be for another person. This disrupted both Fleetwood's and Hoadly's arguments because it takes away any objective criterion that can be used to decide if an event are a miracle. On Locke's view, if we choose to believe an event is a miracle, *and we are right*, the event will always in fact be a miracle caused by God. But there is no telling whether this belief is well-grounded. This leaves room in Locke's account for someone to not accept any event as miraculous. It also allows him to be able to explain examples of disbelief. Because Locke's definition of a miracle turns on what people believe, in the second part of this chapter I turned to Locke's account of the causes of belief in general in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. This allowed me to show why for Locke we can only ever *believe* that a miracle has occurred and God is its cause we can never *know* it. To strengthen this conclusion I turn to an example from Locke's journal. In it we see a number of themes that he further expanded on in the *Essay* and in *A Discourse of Miracles*. Perhaps because it was not intended for publication Locke's journals make it

particularly clear that he was skeptical about grounding revealed religion in inspiration—even when accompanied by a miracle.

The attempts by Fleetwood and Hoadly to respond to the establishment problem and Locke's response to Fleetwood and Hoadly led to the argument from miracles further degrading as a way to ground the truth of revelation. If Locke was right the argument could no longer provide knowledge—only belief. The argument from miracles was soon to reach a crisis point. In the next chapter, I argue that in response to this crisis thinkers begin to abandon the argument from miracles in favor of the argument from prophecy. I further argue that this alternative was short lived in large part because of the critical work of Anthony Collins.

Chapter 3

3 The Contributions of Anthony Collins

Those arguing for the truth of a revealed religion need to establish that the revealed message comes from God. In early modern England, this was often done by appeal to miracles worked by God or some person claiming to be speaking with divine authority. But it has been shown that the argument from miracles suffered from a number of weaknesses. Perhaps surprisingly to modern, post-Humean readers, these weaknesses had little to do with the difficulty of accepting testimony to the occurrence of miracles. They instead arose from considering who might have caused them. Ruling out the possibility that miracles are performed by the devil was by many taken to require establishing that the revealed message is consistent with what God wants to tell us. But this presupposes that we already know what God wants to tell us, leading to a circularity problem if the revelation the miracle supports is our only means of knowing this (and a triviality problem otherwise).

Hobbes's attempts to get around this problem by grounding the revealed message in the credit of an apostolic tradition or the authority of a sovereign only gave rise to an establishment problem (a circularity problem confronted by the first authors of scripture or by the Sovereign) whereas Boyle's and Locke's attempts to demand that revelation be consistent with a minimal, natural religion grounded on reason only gave rise to an alternative establishment problem. Either the content of revelation taken hostage by the first person to propose a body of revealed truths consistent with natural religion, or the choice between rival systems is one that is only to be determined by ultimate military success at the end of history. Fleetwood's and Hoadly's attempts to avoid the establishment problem by claiming that only God can perform miracles, or that divine miracles can be distinguished from diabolical miracles by how much more impressive or numerous they are, only gave rise to an even more toxic problem, the self-reference problem. Even granting that miracles, or certain miracles, can be proven to be divine, all the evidence we have for Christian miracles is contained in the New Testament, which is the very book of revealed truth that those miracles were performed to authenticate. Were

the authenticity of that book questioned, all the miracles it contains would be questioned along with it.

By the early eighteenth century, British thought about these matters had reached a point where thinkers had begun to abandon the argument from miracles in favor of another foundation for revealed religion, the argument from the fulfillment, by the New Testament message, of prophecies found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament could not be dismissed as a Christian forgery, because the original text antedates Christianity and the extant copies were presumed to be largely faithful to the original. The heyday of this alternative form of apologetics was, however, short-lived. This was in large part because of the critical work of Anthony Collins.

This chapter examines that episode in the history of the debate. In Section 3.1 below I first consider the origins of Collins's approach to the critical study of Revelation in his early *Essay concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions, The Evidence whereof depends upon Human Testimony*. I then turn, in Section 3.2, to consider his only thinly veiled attack on the argument from the fulfillment of prophecy and its consequences for the subsequent history of the debate over the foundations of Christianity.

3.1 Collins's *Essay*

Anthony Collins's *An Essay concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions, The Evidence whereof depends upon Human Testimony* is generally considered to be his first published work, although it has recently been argued, using publisher's advertisements, that *A Letter to the Learned Mr. Henry Dodwell*—the book that began the Clarke/Collins correspondence—was published four months earlier.²⁴⁹ It is a contribution to the debate about religious mystery that started with John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696). However what is interesting about the book for my purposes is what it has to say about the use of reason in evaluating the acceptability of claims concerning revealed

²⁴⁹ For the details of this argument see, J. Dybikowski, 'Collins, Anthony (1676–1729)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/article/5933, accessed 6 June 2017].

truths of all sorts, whether mysterious or not. In addressing this issue, Collins attacked the distinction between things above reason and things contrary to reason, a distinction that had been drawn by a number of writers going back at least to Boyle, and endorsed by none other than his recently deceased friend and mentor, John Locke. This raises the incidental question of whether Locke's version of the distinction was meant to fall under Collins's attack. I consider Locke's position briefly in section 3.1.2 below and suggest that it is ultimately not that different from Collins's. In section 3.1.3 I show that Collins's analysis nonetheless goes beyond Locke's in a way that sets the stage for the attack on prophecy that he was to take up near the end of his career. I first lay out Collins's position on the assessment of revealed propositions.

3.1.1 Collins's Assessment of Revealed Propositions

An Essay concerning the Use of Reason is based on a broadly Lockean epistemology, where knowledge consists in the agreement or disagreement of ideas that are joined in propositions. Reason is the faculty of the mind that discerns this agreement or disagreement.²⁵⁰ As with Locke, we can arrive at knowledge when the ideas in a proposition agree immediately or intuitively, or we can discover an agreement between two ideas that don't agree immediately through the use of a demonstration, which is a chain of intuitively evident propositions beginning with one of the two ideas and ending with the other. Propositions can also agree or disagree probabilistically. Collins diverged slightly with Locke on the nature of probability. For Collins, when we ourselves perceive the probable agreement or disagreement of ideas this is an opinion. When we assent to this probable agreement or disagreement because of the testimony of others, it is called faith. Collins's primary interest in *An Essay concerning the Use of Reason* was in propositions that involve testimony, and so faith.

Collins was clear that testimony "is a very great foundation of our Knowledg [sic]." He pointed out that our historical accounts require testimony, and that "all our Journeys for Wealth, pleasure or improvement of the Mind" also require testimony, as do all of our

²⁵⁰ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 3.

experiments in natural philosophy. Most importantly, he claimed that our belief in revealed religion is grounded on testimony. Otherwise it would be necessary that “Miracles were every day wrought for its Confirmation before our Eyes, or that every particular man had once in his Life an immediate Communication from God of all its divine Truths.” However, according to Collins, in spite of its importance, testimony by itself it amounts to nothing “unless accompanied with these two Circumstances, credibility of Persons, and credibility of the Things related.”²⁵¹

Locke had similarly maintained that probability has two grounds:

First, The conformity of any thing with our own Knowledge, Observation, and Experience.

Secondly, The Testimony of others, vouching their Observation and Experience. In the Testimony of others, is to be considered, 1. The Number. 2. The Integrity. 3. The Skill of the Witnesses. 4. The Design of the Author, where it is a Testimony out of a Book cited. 5. The Consistency of the Parts, and Circumstances of the Relation. 6. Contrary Testimonies.²⁵²

Locke had been trying to establish a general account of probability that would allow him to divide our assent into higher or lower degrees depending on how well the proposition we are assenting to agrees with our experience, and how good the testimony is for it. In the case where the proposition we are assenting to agrees with our experience, and there is a large amount of reliable testimony, we have *assurance*—the highest degree of assent.

Locke would have wanted his account to apply both to what Collins identified as an opinion and to what Collins called “faith.”

In the service of his general account of probability, Locke drew a distinction between how a probable proposition relates to our experience and the quality of the testimony in

²⁵¹ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 6.

²⁵² *E IV.xv.4*.

its favor. Collins described this as a distinction between the person reporting the proposition and the content of the proposition being reported. Collins is in effect presenting a position very similar to Locke's using different words.

Collins wrote that, "By *Credibility of Persons*, I understand Mens having the means of Information, Capacity to understand, Honesty and Disinterestedness."²⁵³ This is not a particularly deep explanation. Details about the person providing testimony were not Collins's primary focus in *An Essay concerning the Use of Reason*. Instead, he was much more interested in assessing the proposition that is being related.

His discussion of these propositions consists of three primary points with the third including 6 additional sub-points. He considered the propositions that a witness reports to explicitly assert relations between their own past ideas. His strategy was to show that if we cannot have an idea of something we will not be able to understand the proposition containing it and to pursue the consequences of this fact for the content of revelation. A number of claims that are said by divines to be "above reason" fall under this category.

1. The first thing that Collins understood by the credibility of things related is that the words that are being used have "to stand for known Ideas, or Ideas that we are capable of forming." If instead, the words stand for ideas that we don't know, or for ideas that we don't have the faculties to perceive, then there are, "no objects for the Mind to exert it self upon."²⁵⁴ In this case, the words being used are just sounds, and any revelation containing them is meaningless.

2. The second thing that Collins understood by the credibility of things related is that, "The words must stand for those Ideas which the use of Language has appropriated them to, or for what the Author or Relator says he understands by them, or for what the visible design of the Author or *Relator* determines them to signify."²⁵⁵ These, according to

²⁵³ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason* 6.

²⁵⁴ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 7.

²⁵⁵ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 7.

Collins are all of the different ways that we can know the meanings of words. If some non-standard ideas are being taken to be signified by the words, and we are not apprised of that fact, we are in the same situation as we are with the previous point. We can't form ideas that relate properly to the words. Collins allowed that people can come to accept relations between words that do not have ideas associated with them. A person who is born blind, and listens to a "large discourse of Colours" can't give her assent to a proposition about them, such as that her face is red. But she can understand, based on the integrity of the person that she is talking to, that this person believes that there is something signified by the word "red," and that this thing has a relationship to her face. In this situation, however, what we are assenting to is something that is undetermined—it doesn't have any content. It is like people speaking a language that we don't know—they may say something that it seems like we can assent to, but what we are assenting to has no content because we can't attach any meaning to their words.

3. The third thing that Collins understood by the credibility of things related is that the ideas connected in the proposition cannot be repugnant to one another, or to anything else that I know to be true. "Anything else we know" means knowledge in the strict, Lockean sense of what follows by intuition or from a demonstration. If instead, the proposition is only probable, no matter how improbable it may be, we can accept testimony to it as true if it comes from a credible enough witness. "That an Oak should grow up to the size and stature of a Tree of that kind in its perfection in less than an hour, tho very improbable, is as possible as that it should do so in an hundred and fifty Years, and consequently as free from Contradiction."²⁵⁶ We cannot accept revealed propositions that are contrary to reason. As long as they are not contrary to reason however, we can accept them.

3.1 In expanding on this conclusion, Collins remarked that it is impossible to believe contradictions, notwithstanding what people may sometimes say. This would mean affirming and denying the same thing at the same time, which is tantamount to believing and disbelieving at the same time.

²⁵⁶ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 9.

3.2 Insofar as contradiction is affirming and denying at one and the same time, it presupposes a sense of the truth and falsity of propositions. To distinguish true things from false things, we need a criterion for truth. The only criterion that makes sense is perception, “for tho Truth abstractly consider’d consists in the relations of agreement between Ideas; yet being here consider’d relatively to human Understanding, it is not my Truth till I perceive it, nor can I know it to be true but by my own Perception.”²⁵⁷ Collins was not rejecting the distinction between real and seeming connections between ideas or between real and seeming contradictions. He thought that there is a ground for these distinctions. We know this because of the experience of having found something that at first seemed to contradict reason and then turned out not to. “Yet notwithstanding that, we can only govern our selves by seeming relations and appearances, because real relations and appearances can but seem to be relations and appearances.”²⁵⁸

3.3 If perception of the relations between ideas is our criterion for truth, then we need to apply this consideration “in all the train of our Reasonings, and in all Propositions that are offer’d to our Assent,” particularly including those concerning “antient Fact,” which cannot be excused on account of their antiquity. They, too, must at least be in conformity with what we now experience on pain of giving up on the criterion of truth.²⁵⁹ Collins did not dwell on these considerations but they are central to his account. His strategy was to dismiss propositions concerning ideas we cannot perceive because this forecloses perceiving any relations between them.

3.4 What holds for “antient Fact” also holds for purported inspiration or revelations from God. The propositions in any revelation must be about things that can be apprehended by our faculties. For example, if a book containing nothing but contradictions were—on human authority—delivered as a revelation from God, we wouldn’t be able to accept the testimony in that book, as we can’t accept any testimony that contains contradictions. This is the case despite its proposed divinity.

²⁵⁷ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 10.

²⁵⁸ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 10.

²⁵⁹ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 10.

3.5 More generally, doctrines that contradict not only themselves, but the evidence of our faculties cannot be accepted. As Hume was later to do in a similar context (perhaps drawing on Collins's scholarship²⁶⁰), Collins claimed that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is such a case, citing Tilloston's argument that, even if it were supported by a miracle, we could not accept a doctrine that is contrary to our natural reason as coming from God.

The Proofs of any matter of Fact not being in themselves so sure as is the Evidence of several Propositions, that by the Use of my Faculties I perceive to be true, there is no ground to admit any matter of Fact as true, which contradicts a Proposition built on greater Evidence [namely, my faculties].²⁶¹

3.6 Rather than giving us an advantage over animals, religion would prove to be a disadvantage if it served to enable us to believe propositions that are either contradictory amongst themselves or contrary to our experience.

Collins noted two additional ways that we should use reason when testimony that “upon the least Evidence can be suppos'd to come from God” is at issue. First, we should “endeavour to find out such a sense of a suppos'd Revelation as is agreeable to the discoverys of our Reason, if the words under any kind of Construction will bear it, tho at first view they may seem repugnant to Reason, and to one another.”²⁶² For example, places in the Holy Scripture that ascribe human passions and actions like God resting, or repenting, or being aroused to anger, and so on, should not simply be rejected given that reason shows us that God is not capable of these human traits. Instead, we might consider that the people writing the Holy Scripture were not primarily interested in “Speculative

²⁶⁰ I have noticed that Hume's references in “A Dialogue” to Horace, Anacreon and Petronius on beauty, and in the *Dialogues on Natural Religion* to Seneca on the proper form of worship are already present in Collins's works. So are a number of Hume's references in the *Natural History of Religion* to ancient peoples and their beliefs. Unfortunately, by the time I discovered the extent of these parallels, it was too late to try to reconstruct a record of their original location in Collins's voluminous works, and the opportunity to reconstruct this data has not yet arisen.

²⁶¹ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 12.

²⁶² [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 13.

Instruction,” but were writing for “the bulk of Mankind.” Had the authors of scripture been interested in writing a treatise of metaphysics, they would have been more careful. “But in Treatises design’d principally to have a moral effect, they make use of Expressions most likely to attain that end.”²⁶³ When a revelation consists of words “whose literal meaning is False, but whose real meaning is consistent with the justest Notions of Reason and Philosophy ... we ought to examine whether the Words under any Construction will bear a reasonable sense.”²⁶⁴ We do this when to understand the words literally would be unreasonable given their authors’ aims.

The other way that we need to use reason when making sense of testimony that is supposed to come from God, is to “not reject the whole for the sake of some Passages which cannot be suppos’d to proceed from God, but rather to presume they have been added to the Text, out of some particular Views and Designs.”²⁶⁵ With human writings, it is fair to reject or deny something as coming from an author if it contains anything inconsistent with their character, or the times that they lived in. However, this is not the case with writings that are thought to come from God because these writings are so important that it is tempting to transcribers and translators and the keepers of scriptures to interpolate their own meanings into them. Collins noted that there are facts related in books of the Bible purportedly written by Moses that only occurred after Moses’s death, and so could not have been written by Moses. As well, a number of place names have been changed from what their name would have been when Moses was alive. These are not reasons for rejecting the books of Moses as works of divine revelation, though they would be reasons for rejecting a work purportedly written by Shakespeare.²⁶⁶

These last two observations are striking, especially in the light of the later development of Collins’s thought. Whereas the earlier observations do little more than recapitulate a basically Lockean approach to the assessment of revelation, these last two observations

²⁶³ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 14.

²⁶⁴ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 13-14.

²⁶⁵ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 16.

²⁶⁶ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 16-17.

open the door to a new, more liberal hermeneutics, one that has more in common with 19th and early 20th century thought than it does with the thought of Collins's time. Literal interpretation of the Bible is rejected in favor of interpretation guided by a sense of the underlying message the inspired writers were attempting to convey and the possibility that new words may be needed to fit the message to the modern context. And the door is opened rejecting portions of the revealed message as corrupt.

Collins appealed to his account to reject “the famous Distinction of *Things above, and Things contrary to Reason*.”²⁶⁷ According to Collins, propositions can be divided into two groups—those that are agreeable to reason, and those that are not agreeable (i.e., contrary) to reason. This is a mutually exhaustive categorization that leaves no third classification available. To support this general conclusion, Collins considered a number of different ways a separate category of propositions “above reason” might be understood, and argued that each is ineligible.

One sense of “above reason” comes from Robert Boyle. In a long passage, quoted by Collins, Boyle spoke of a person who cannot see the bottom of a body of water and a diver who can. Here, “above reason” refers to a situation where we cannot access information with our senses, but when someone who can does so, they make this information that was previously “above our reason” available to us. In Boyle's example, the diver proceeds to make two pieces of information accessible to us. One is that there are mollusks with pearls in them at the bottom of the ocean. The other is that the pearls are larger than the shells that contain them. This is supposed to illustrate the distinction between what is merely above reason and what is contrary to reason. Collins's response was that this distinction is not properly drawn, “for a Distinction supposes some common Agreement in the things distinguish'd”²⁶⁸ Otherwise put, all distinctions must be between different species of the same genus. Strictly (if we are following Aristotle) there can only be two species, which are distinguished by the fact that one of them possesses a

²⁶⁷ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 18.

²⁶⁸ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 20.

distinguishing feature whereas the other lacks it. In Boyle's example, what is contrary to reason, the claim that the contained pearls are larger than the containing shell, lacks the distinguishing feature of being reasonable. It is repugnant to reason. In Aristotelian terms, it is the negative species, the one that lacks the distinguishing feature. So its opposed partner ought to be the one that has the distinguishing feature, which in this case would obviously have to be the feature of being agreeable to reason. But this category includes the remaining part of the diver's testimony, that there are pearls in the shells. This proposition is agreeable to the reason of both the diver and the spectator, but merely inaccessible to the senses and memory of the spectator. So, the category of what is "above reason" here falls under the category of what is agreeable to reason. It is a sub-species, characterized by its lack of the further defining feature "known by sense experience or memory". It is not a third category between what is agreeable to reason and what is contrary to it.

Collins was less successful at dealing with a subtly different, second way "above reason" might be used. On Collins's account, it is illustrated by the case of a traveler who tells us about the details of a far off culture that we wouldn't have access to on our own. This information is said to be "above reason." However, the traveler also adds something that is contrary to our reason—in this case that the culture has existed for eternity. In this example, what is above reason includes the information that we could have learned from our own experience had we been there, while what is contrary to reason is not flatly incoherent, as in the previous example, but still inconsistent with what we independently know (presumably, on the basis of a cosmological argument demonstrating that the universe is not of infinite duration but was created at a point in past time).²⁶⁹ Collins claimed that, as with the first case, this isn't a proper distinction. In this case, what is "contrary to reason" is demonstrably (as opposed to intuitively) contradictory. (It is, after all, not immediately apparent that there is any absurdity in the existence of the universe

²⁶⁹ Supposing that the infinity of the universe in past time is not demonstrably false, but only believed to be on the strength of, something like a revelation that assures us that God created it some finite time ago would destroy the difference the example is intended to illustrate, as it is a part of the example that both sides of the traveler's story are non-contradictory.

for an infinity of past time. It takes a demonstration to prove this, and the demonstration is so far as being intuitively obvious that the proposition has been denied by some.) Accordingly, what is in accord with reason would have to be what is *not* demonstrably contradictory. Collins wanted to apply his response to the earlier case as well: if what is contrary to reason is what possesses the positive feature of being demonstrably contradictory, then what is not contrary to reason, what is in accord with reason, must possess the negative feature of not being demonstrably contradictory. But then, as before, what is supposedly “above reason,” namely, the traveler’s tales of all other features of the foreign society, turns out to be just a sub-species of what is in accord with reason, and not something intermediate between what is in accord with reason and what is contrary to it.

But this case does not lend itself as well to this solution. While the existence of a contradiction can be demonstrated, the non-existence of a contradiction cannot be. Failing to derive a contradiction may simply indicate lack of ingenuity at discovering the demonstration, not that there is no such demonstration.²⁷⁰ Of course, actuality implies possibility, so if we experience something or have experienced things that are closely analogous, that can be taken to serve as a possibility proof. But that leaves the problem of how we respond to tales of unactualized possibilities. In the case at hand we have no experience of the foreign society. If the traveler tells us of a society like ours, we can invoke our own experience as a possibility proof. But as the tales become increasingly unlike anything we have experienced, they come to occupy a gulf between what is demonstrably contradictory and what is not demonstrably contradictory, because not being able to derive a contradiction from the stories is not the same thing as knowing for a fact that no contradiction is derivable. This would make the consistency of the traveler’s stories something that really is “above reason” (above either a demonstration of contradiction or a demonstration of consistency).

²⁷⁰ Modern logicians will demonstrate that a set of propositions is consistent by formalizing those propositions and showing that the formalized set has a model. But this begs the question of whether the formalization is adequate. The empty set is trivially consistent, so the closer one gets to it, the easier it becomes to find a model. But that may just be because the formalization has failed to capture the content responsible for the contradiction.

Collins might have responded by appealing to point 3 above to insist that understanding the traveler's words without finding a contradiction in them serves as a proof of consistency. Had that been his position, it would be tantamount to accepting the principle that whatever is conceivable is possible. This is by no means an unusual tenet for a philosopher to have maintained at the time, but it is not the easiest thing for someone who accepts point 3.2 above to sustain. If there can be real and seeming contradictions there can presumably be real and seeming conceivability. Things that seem conceivable (like the infinity of the world in past time) might subsequently be demonstrated to be contradictory.

Collins might instead have taken a more modest line, to the effect that when we cannot derive a contradiction from a claim we default to denying it if it bears too little analogy to our past experience, or granting it on the strength of the credibility of the witness, or reaching a decision by weighing these opposed factors. But if this is what we do, it seems tantamount to recognizing a category of propositions between what is demonstrably contradictory and what is not demonstrably contradictory — a category that must be dealt with in its own special way. It will not be enough to object that any proposition must in itself be either contradictory or consistent, so that there is no intermediate possibility. This would of course mean that any proposition must *in itself* be either in accord with reason (not demonstrably contradictory) or contrary to it (demonstrably contradictory). But the question at issue is not how propositions are to be categorized *in themselves*, but how they are to be categorized *for us*, that is, in relation to our knowledge. On this matter it seems that a case can be made that there are propositions in a no-man's land between the demonstrably contradictory and the not demonstrably contradictory. The proper categorization, on this account, is threefold: demonstrably contradictory, demonstrably non-contradictory (e.g. by appeal to actuality), and neither.

The remaining ways of understanding “above reason” are of a different, and more tractable sort. A third way is “when we have not an Idea exactly conformable to the thing

our Idea refers to.”²⁷¹ Collins conceded that this is no doubt true of many of our ideas because there are very few things that we have adequate ideas of. However, in this case “above reason” is used to refer to things that are not at all objects of our understanding. “[F]or whatever exists which falls not within the compass of our Ideas, is nothing to us, nor can we talk or think about it.”²⁷² But the whole point of introducing the notion of things “above reason” was to suggest that there is an order of things that we can have ideas of, but that are not in accord with our reason.

A fourth use of “above reason” is one that arises in situations where “we are ignorant of the manner, or of the Physical Cause of [a thing’s] Existence.”²⁷³ Collins instanced our ignorance of the reason why matter exists, of what allows two parts of matter to stay together, and of why one chunk of matter is red when another is green. But these are again cases where what is said to be above reason is something that we have no idea of. Since there is effectively nothing that is being conceived in these cases, there is nothing “above reason” being revealed.

A fifth use of “above reason” is applied to “things of which we have no Idea, and which yet may be the Objects of our Assent.” Collins allowed that there are many things that exist that we have no idea of. But objects of the understanding are not among them. Otherwise, they would be objects of the understanding, and not objects of the understanding at the same time.²⁷⁴ So no object of the understanding can be above reason.

It might be claimed that a proposition is above reason when it is contrary to human reason but is not to divine reason. But then “reason” is not being used in the same sense in the phrases “contrary to reason” and “above reason,” so the distinction only emerges by equivocating on “reason.” For example, the mysteries of the gospel are presumably

²⁷¹ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 21.

²⁷² [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 22.

²⁷³ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 22.

²⁷⁴ [Collins], *Essay concerning the Use of Reason*, 23.

not mysterious for God, and so are neither contrary to nor above God's reason. But (at the risk of immoderately declaring some degree of allegiance to anti-trinitarianism, Arianism, etc.), they are not only above human reason but contrary to it. Reason is being used in two different ways (as divine and human) but that in neither way is there a distinction between "above" and "contrary."

3.1.2 Locke on propositions above and contrary to reason

Collins's interest in removing the distinction between propositions that are contrary to reason and those that are above raises the question of where Locke's version of this distinction fits into this picture. Locke first distinguished between propositions that are according to reason, those that are above reason, and those that are contrary to reason near the end of *Essay* IV.xvii, "Of Reason." These distinctions are important for Locke because propositions that are above reason are the proper subject matter for revelation. In the following passage, Locke defined each of the three types of proposition and provided an example of each type.

1. *According to reason* are such propositions, whose truth we can discover, by examining and tracing those ideas we have from sensation and reflexion; and by natural deduction, find to be true, or probable. 2. *Above reason* are such propositions, whose truth or probability we cannot by reason derive from those principles. 3. *Contrary to reason* are such propositions, as are inconsistent with, or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct ideas. Thus the existence of one God is according to reason; the existence of more than one God, contrary to reason; the resurrection of the dead, above reason.²⁷⁵

Locke expanded further on how to understand these distinctions. He maintained that it is not right to place faith and reason in opposition to each other Reason should regulate faith, establishing the things that we can have faith in. It is important to do this properly

²⁷⁵ E IV.xvii.23.

because until we do, “we shall in vain dispute, and endeavour to convince one another in Matters of Religion.”²⁷⁶

To do this, we need to know what reason and faith involve.

Reason therefore here, as contradistinguished to *Faith*, I take to be the discovery of the Certainty or Probability of such Propositions or Truths, which the Mind arrives at by Deductions made from such *Ideas*, which it has got by the use of its natural Faculties, *viz.* by Sensation, or Reflection.

Faith, on the other side, is the Assent to any Proposition, not thus made out by the Deductions of Reason; but upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming from GOD, in some extraordinary way of Communication. This way of discovering Truths to Men we call *Revelation*.²⁷⁷

While the passage is not entirely straightforward, there is some suggestion that it makes the same mistake earlier attributed to Collins, that of supposing that reason is capable of demonstrating possibilities (non-contradiction) in some other way than by appeal to experience of actuality or inference from such experience. We might manage to do this with complex modes and their relations, which are nothing more than what we define them to be, but the existence of and relations between substances are another matter. If Locke did make this mistake he will have unduly restricted the scope for faith in much the same way Collins did. But the passage is not clear enough to fairly convict Locke of this mistake.

Locke distinguished between “original revelation” and “traditional revelation.” Original revelation is the impression on the mind made immediately by God. No bounds can be set on what kind of information God may transmit through original revelation. Traditional revelation, involves whatever message a person can transmit through the use of language.

²⁷⁶ E IV.xviii.1.

²⁷⁷ E IV.xviii.2.

New simple ideas cannot be delivered using traditional revelation because new simple ideas cannot be transmitted using words.

In principle, the same truths that we can discover using reason can also be revealed. However, since “the knowledge, we have, that this *Revelation* came at first from God, we can never be so sure, as the knowledge we have from the clear and distinct Perception of the Agreements, or Disagreements of our own *Ideas*”²⁷⁸ such matters would be better left to our experience and reasoning to discover. This implies that they will not, in fact, be revealed. It also implies that the truths we accept through revelation cannot match the level of certainty of what we can know using intuition, let alone exceeded it. “And therefore, *no Proposition can be received for Divine Revelation*, or obtain the Assent due to all such, *if it be contrary to our clear intuitive Knowledge*.”²⁷⁹

In all Things therefore, where we have clear Evidence from our *Ideas*, and those Principles of Knowledge, I have above mentioned, *Reason* is the proper Judge; and *Revelation*, though it may in consenting with it, confirm its Dictates, yet cannot in such Cases, invalidate its Decrees: *Nor can we be obliged, where we have the clear and evident Sentence of Reason, to quit it, for the contrary Opinion under a Pretence that it is Matter of Faith*; which can have no Authority against the plain and clear Dictates of *Reason*.²⁸⁰

Because there are many propositions that we have imperfect knowledge of, as well as other things that we can have no knowledge of at all using our faculties, and because these matters may nonetheless be very important for us to know, propositions concerning them are appropriate matters for revelation and so the proper matter of faith. Locke gave the examples of the angels losing their happy state because they rebelled against God, and the dead rising to live again.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ *E IV.xviii.4.*

²⁷⁹ *E IV.xviii.5.*

²⁸⁰ *E IV.xviii.6.*

²⁸¹ *E IV.xvi.12.*

The first of these examples is puzzling. Why should it be important for us to know that the rebel angels lost their happy state? The only obvious answer is deeply ironic: so that it would be revealed to us that the devil exists, and as a consequence that no revelation is simply to be accepted at face value as having come from God.

The second example is even more instructive if it is considered that in Locke's day there was a lively debate over whether a general resurrection of all of humanity at the end of time is a coherent notion. If resurrection means resurrection of the body, then the active and passive destruction of the particles that constitute our bodies may make that impossible for all of us. Some other sense of resurrection may be required, and thinkers were divided over what that sense may be and over whether any sense is coherent. Locke's discussion of personal identity can itself be considered a contribution to that debate, and its contortions an illustration of how far it might be necessary to go to make a case that a revealed doctrine is not in fact contradictory.²⁸²

It is an interesting question whether Locke wanted to instance the resurrection as a case where reason cannot decide whether a proposition is contradictory or consistent and revelation steps in to determine the mind. A conservative reading would follow that Locke, like Collins, mistakenly supposed that reason can demonstrate possibilities and that revelation can only be invoked to persuade us of what reason has beforehand determined to be possible. "Because the Mind, not being certain of the Truth of that it does not evidently know, but only yielding to the Probability that appears in it, is bound to give up its Assent to such a Testimony, which, it is satisfied, comes from one, who cannot err, and will not deceive."²⁸³

When we have good reason to believe that a revealed message comes from God this causes a particularly compelling response to this belief, supposing we can be assured the message has in fact come from God and confident that we have interpreted it correctly.

²⁸² For further discussion see Ruth Boeker, "Locke on Personal Identity: a Response to the Problems of his Predecessors," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55 (2017): 407-434.

²⁸³ *E* IV.xviii.8.

We can follow this testimony even against probability, but only as long as its possibility is evident. “I say, an evident *Revelation* ought to determine our Assent even against Probability.”²⁸⁴ The reason for this is, “Because *Reason*, in that particular Matter, being able to reach no higher than Probability, *Faith* gave the Determination, where *Reason* came short; and *Revelation* discovered on which side the Truth lay.”²⁸⁵

What matters most is not that once we accept that a revealed message comes from God, it can compel us against probability. Instead what matters most is that we make sure that it does not contradict what reason teaches.

There can be no evidence, that any traditional Revelation is of divine Original, in the Words we receive it, and in the Sense we understand it, so clear, and so certain, as that of the Principles of Reason: And therefore, *Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with the clear and self-evident Dictates of reason, has a Right to be urged, or assented to, as a Matter of Faith, wherein Reason hath nothing to do.* Whatever is divine *Revelation*, ought to over-rule all our Opinions, Prejudices, and Interests, and hath a right to be received with full Assent: Such a Submission as this of our *Reason to Faith*, takes not away the Land-marks of Knowledge: This shakes not the Foundations of Reason, but leaves us that Use of our Faculties, for which they were give us.²⁸⁶

3.1.3 Collins’s relation to Locke

Though Locke accepted that there is a distinct class of propositions that are above reason and Collins rejected this classification, it is not clear that the difference between them is anything more than verbal. Both maintained that no revelation can be accepted unless it names ideas that are known to us, and unless it asserts relations between those ideas in which there is no demonstrable contradiction. Whether the class of non-evidently

²⁸⁴ E IV.xviii.9. “Against probability” means against a judgment that declares there to be very low probability that the claim is true, not against a judgment that declares it to have no probability, that is, to be inconsistent.

²⁸⁵ E IV.xviii.9.

²⁸⁶ E IV.xviii.10.

contradictory propositions is really two classes, one of demonstrably consistent propositions and one of propositions that cannot be demonstrated to be either consistent or contradictory and whose possibility we accept on faith, or whether it is a single class that divides into two sub-classes, propositions known by experience and propositions accepted on testimony is a question that both Collins and Locke did not address as clearly as they might have. It is also, however, a question of no great importance for the main lines of either's thought. The most interesting feature of Collins's treatment of revelation is his support of the notion that the literal meaning of the revealed words is not necessarily the intended message, and his view that the reasoner is obligated both to inquire into the intentions of the inspired writers and to consider whether their words have been corrupted. These features of his early thought were to have deep ramifications for his later work on the argument from the fulfillment of prophecy.

3.2 Collins's attack on prophecy

In this section, I first explain the argument from the fulfillment of prophecy in more detail. I then give an example. A complication that comes up when grounding Christianity on the fulfillment of prophecy is how to understand the relation between the Old and the New Testaments. For Hoadly, as mentioned earlier,²⁸⁷ the relation must be one of "exact completion." This was also the model for thinkers such as William Whiston, Samuel Clarke, and Isaac Newton. Unlike Hoadly however, who was happy to allow Christianity to be grounded in any number of different ways, the philosophers in this group were interested in grounding Christianity using primarily the completion of prophecy in the place of other grounds.

In section two, I show that the growing popularity of the argument from the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy led to a rejection of the argument from miracles.²⁸⁸ I expand on

²⁸⁷ [Hoadly], *A Letter*, 20.

²⁸⁸ I need to say a little more about the relationship between these two arguments because prophecy is often taken to be a form of miracle rather than an alternative to miracles. A prophecy is simply a prediction. Some predictions turn out to be true and others false. If I watch a person standing on a roof throw an egg at my car parked in the street, I can prophesize what will happen next. The fact that I then see an egg broken

some of the reasons that Collins gave for rejecting the argument from miracles. I also provide examples drawn from Collins's critics that show that his views on this matter were widely shared, even by them. This was a time when arguments against accepting miracles on the basis of testimony, like the one David Hume would offer only 25 years later would have seemed quaint and unimportant. Everyone had already given up on miracles in favor of the argument from the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. However, these arguments for grounding Christianity in prophecy were short-lived. Collins's attack scuttled them, prompting a return to the argument from miracles. When that return occurred, it was as if all the problems that had been uncovered by the past generations had been forgotten. Hume's argument seized everyone's attention as the most serious problem confronting the argument from miracles. Ironically, the only ultimate effect of Collins's devastating attack on the argument from prophecy was to obscure the earlier problems that had been raised with the argument from miracles, though they were every bit as serious, if not more so, than the one Hume was to raise.

In the third section, I expand on a number of problems with using the exact completion of biblical prophecy to ground Christianity. These can be divided into three types. The first arises when a prophecy from the Old Testament is originally completed during the time of the Old Testament. Since the prophecy has already been completed, its completion can't be understood in a literal way when applied to the New Testament. Another

on the windshield of my car is not a miracle. If I prophesize what number will come up in a lottery, and that number comes up, this is still no miracle. Anyone who has won the lottery has done this. If I do it for many lotteries, only then might others start to wonder if I have been given some kind of special power. The prophecies of the coming of a Messiah found in the Old Testament were revelations, not miracles. They were presented as the revealed word of God concerning what would happen in the future. But that future had not yet come, and for the Jewish religion, it still has not come. So, for the Jewish religion it is still an open question whether those prophecies are (miraculously) true. For the Christian religion (or some Christians) the prophecies have been fulfilled. But the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is not important for Christians because it is miraculous and so proves, so many centuries after the fact, that Isaiah or some other Jewish prophet really was divinely inspired. It is important because the fulfillment of prophecy passes an authenticity test set by a rival religion. There is nothing miraculous about successfully passing a test. At least, there doesn't have to be. Whether there is or is not anything miraculous in this particular case of test-passing is not the issue. It is the bare passing of the test that constitutes the argument for the truth of the Christian religion, not whether it is miraculous that it did so.

problem is with touted examples of Old Testament prophecy that are were not obviously intended as prophecies by the Old Testament writers. The third problem involves New Testament claims of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that are not obviously present in the Old Testament.

In the fourth section I expand on William Whiston’s solution to these problems. Whiston was a close associate of Newton who argued for the exact completion of biblical prophecy by claiming that all appearances to the contrary are due to corruptions to the original text of the Old Testament. He argued that once the text has been restored, these problems will go away. He presented a number of strategies for trying to establish the least corrupt version of the text.

In the fifth section, I present Collins’s own “solution” to the exact completion problem. Collins proposed to use allegorical interpretation to establish an exact completion. I put “solution” in quotes because Collins’s solution is carefully crafted to be patently ridiculous, though he presented it with a straight face. At the same time, and here, there was no joke, he argued that this solution is the only viable solution. Whiston’s, in particular, is hopeless. Collins exploited the suggestions of Surenhusius, a Dutch scholar, who wrote a book expanding on a well-researched method for the allegorical completion of prophecy. While preserving every outward appearance of being serious, Collins made it clear that Surenhusius’s method is so flexible that it can be used to show a connection between any two texts. In sum, the method of exact completion has challenges that can’t be overcome. However, the only viable alternative—using allegorical reasoning—is so loose that it can prove anything.

In the sixth section, I show the legacy of Collins’s arguments. One place where they had an immediate impact was on the work of Samuel Clarke. I show that Clarke changed his Christian apologetics in response to Collins’s arguments. Collins’s strategy also opened the door for the allegorical approach to be applied directly to Jesus’s miracles, a deflationary enterprise that was taken up by Thomas Whoolston. I have already alluded to a final, somewhat unfortunate legacy: the resurrection of the miracles debate as a debate

around the new criticisms of David Hume, which only distracts from the equally serious if not more serious problems that had already been raised in the previous generation.

3.2.1 What the question “What grounds Christianity?” is asking

Christianity is a religion that emerged out of Judaism. Because of this, there is significant overlap in the two religions’ holy-books. The Jewish Tanakh, which includes the Torah, contains much of the same material as the Christian Old Testament. Because of this, these writings are in the unique position of forming the foundation of two distinct religions.

The basic narrative of Christianity, as presented in the New Testament, is that Jesus is the messiah who was foretold in the Old Testament. Keeping this narrative in mind, the basic idea behind grounding Christianity using prophecy is to show that events described in the New Testament can be connected in the proper way to events that were prophesized in the Old Testament. This can be clarified with an example, Psalms 118: 22-23 as compared to Matthew 21: 42, Mark 12: 10-11, and Luke 20: 17.²⁸⁹

Old Testament: Psalms 118: 22-23

- (22) The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
- (23) The LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.

New Testament: Matthew 21: 42

- (42) Jesus said to them, “have you never read in the Scriptures:
“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes”?”

²⁸⁹ All of these passages are taken from the NIV version of the Bible.

New Testament: Mark 12: 10-11

(10) Haven't you read this passage of Scripture:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

(11) the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes”?

New Testament: Luke 20: 17

(17) Jesus looked directly at them and asked, “Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone”?

The New Testament passages can be read as Jesus's claiming for himself the status of the rejected stone that the Lord has made the cornerstone of the edifice, an event that the passage from Psalms might be read as having predicted would occur. In his *Notes on the Bible*, Barnes mentions that this image from the Old Testament could be an allusion to David as well as any number of others. He continues that, “We are not to suppose that this had original reference to the Messiah, but the language was applicable to him; and it is used in the passages above to, in addresses to the Jews, merely to show them how the principle was found in their own writings, that one who was rejected, like a stone regarded as unfit to be worked into any part of a building, might be in reality so important that it would be laid yet at the very corner, and become the most valuable stone in the edifice – that on which the whole superstructure would rest.”²⁹⁰

This is all well and good, but it is far from obvious that the New Testament passages fulfill a prophecy made in the Old Testament. They could be read as nothing more than a report of an attempt on Jesus's part to get people to listen to him even though he was not

²⁹⁰ Albert Barnes. *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Whole Bible*,
[<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/psalms/118.htm>, accessed 20 May 2017].

part of the religious establishment. At the time of speaking, the only part of the Old Testament text that Jesus had satisfied was the part about being an outsider or a building stone that had been rejected by the builders. The part about being elevated by the Lord to be a corner stone was yet to be established. Jesus's words are therefore more plausibly interpreted as a caution to his listeners: "Pay heed to me because scripture tells you that an outsider will prove to be the one God elevates, and I *might* just be that one." Any pretended messiah could have made a similar claim, and any one of them who proved to be successful in his enterprise (e.g. Mohammed) could claim to have met all of the requirements.

This raises the question of how to understand the relation between the Old and the New Testaments. The obvious, because it is the most compelling answer, is to demand that there be something on the order of an exact completion. Everything that is prophesized about the Messiah ought to be fulfilled in the life of Jesus, and enough must have been prophesized to rule out any competing claim. The language of "exact completion" of biblical prophecy was invoked in Hoadly's response to Fleetwood. Samuel Clarke, William Whiston, and Isaac Newton also held a version of this view.²⁹¹ But one does not have to look very far into the texts to discover that an exact completion is hard to find for many different reasons.

The next best alternative is a better allegorical relationship between the life of Jesus and the Old Testament messianic prophecies than is found in any competing claims. An allegorical relationship is a relationship that requires interpretation, using rules of allegorical reasoning. In this case the prophecy is "completed" in a "second" or spiritual sense, rather than in a direct way. This is the view that Collins presented. Barnes gestures toward this when he mentions that that Psalm 118 did not have an original reference to Jesus but that it can be read as an allusion to him. At least in this case, the later reading is not one that does significant violence to the original text.

²⁹¹ Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth*, 1708, 95. Force cites this passage a number of times including 63-64; Clarke, Samuel (1716). *A Discourse Concerning the unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, London. 317; James E. Force. *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 70-77 argues for these claims in Newton.

Unlike Hoadly who was happy to ground Christianity in both Jesus's miracles and the completion of Biblical prophecy, thinkers like Clarke, Whiston, and Newton wanted to ground Christianity only on the completion of Biblical prophecy.²⁹² They said this, in part, because they didn't think that the miracles of Jesus formed a suitable ground. It would be going too far to present this as an instance of Christians arguing against grounding Christianity in Jesus's miracles. Newton, Whiston, and Clarke were all imputed to be Arians. Whiston and Clarke both got into trouble for their anti-Trinitarian writings and Bishop Gibson notoriously recommended Clarke to Queen Anne as the fittest man in the Realm to be the Archbishop of Canterbury but for the one problem that he was not a Christian.²⁹³ But the reasons for refraining to ground Christianity on Jesus's miracles are ones that might have been felt by more orthodox thinkers.

There are a number of arguments against using miracles to ground Christianity in Collins's work. In what follows, I show that a number of Collins's critics also indorsed these arguments. Rather than trying to undermine Christianity, these critics were English divines interested in establishing a firm foundation for it.

3.2.2 Collins's and his critics' arguments against miracles

At the outset of *Grounds and Reasons* Collins wrote,

Christianity is founded on Judaism, and the New Testament on the Old; and Jesus is the person said in the New Testament to be promis'd in the Old, under the character of the Messiah of the Jews, who as such only, claims the obedience and submission of the world. Accordingly, it is the design of the authors of the New, to prove all the parts of christianity from the Old Testament. . .²⁹⁴

²⁹² Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth*, 1708, 95. Force cites this passage a number of times including 63-64; Clarke, Samuel (1716). *A Discourse Concerning the unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, London. 317; Force, *William Whiston*, 70-77.

²⁹³ The quip comes from Voltaire and is noted by Enzo Vailati in his introduction to Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xii.

²⁹⁴ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 4.

Everything hangs on whether the New Testament completes the prophecy of the Old. The miracles of Jesus are no argument worth considering, except insofar as those miracles were themselves prophesized, in which case it is not the miraculous events as such that prove Christianity, but the fact that they are the fulfillment of events that were foretold. Any other events would have done just as well, provided they were only idiosyncratic enough not to be replicated in the lives of other contenders for the messianic title—no violation of laws of nature need occur.

Collins's arguments against grounding Christianity on miracles occur in Chapter seven of *Grounds and Reasons* and are presented as an objection to the view that Christianity can be grounded entirely in prophecy.

Nor can *miracles*, said to be wrought by Jesus and his apostles, in behalf of Christianity, avail any thing in the case: for *miracles* [reported in the New Testament] can never render a foundation [i.e., the New Testament] valid, which is in itself invalid [i.e., a possible forgery]; can never make a false inference [that the miracle worker is the messiah foretold in the Old Testament] true; can never make a *prophecy* fulfill'd, which is not fulfill'd [the way to fulfill a prophecy is to do what was prophesized, not to perform a miracle and claim that the miracle proves that you must have fulfilled the prophecy]²⁹⁵, and can never mark out a Messias, or Jesus for the Messias, if both are not mark'd out in the Old Testament.²⁹⁶

Collins's arguments for these claims raise two problems with appeals to miracles. The first is that we can't always trust people's testimony. Self-interested people lie, especially when it comes to confirming religious doctrine. "Besides, miracles, said to be wrought,

²⁹⁵ This would only work if it was prophesized that the miracle would be performed. If it is prophesized that the messiah will be born of the virgin, then being born of the virgin counts as the fulfillment of prophecy, and this is more important than whether this is a feat that could be brought off without violating any laws of nature. If it is simply prophesized that a messiah will come, and nothing is said about whether the messiah will work miracles, then no number of miracles will prove that a given individual is the messiah who was foretold.

²⁹⁶ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 31-32.

may be often justly deem'd false reports, when attributed to persons, who claim an authority from the Old Testament, which they impertinently alledge to support their pretences."²⁹⁷ There are few people who would have more interest in wanting to establish the truth of the miracles reported in the Gospels than the people writing the Gospels. So the truth of Gospel miracles established by Gospel testimony should be called into question. This is of course the self-reference problem, the particularly toxic version of the circularity problem.

The second problem Collins raised is the old, demon deceiver problem raised by Deuteronomy 13, which suggests that diabolical miracles can be performed to verify a false revelation. It seems to be suggested God would allow this in order to test our faith. If we follow Deuteronomy, Jesus's miracles will not successfully ground Christianity. According to Deuteronomy we are not to accept anything contrary to the established doctrine (the Judaism of the Pharisees) when confronted by a prophet (Jesus) who is vouching for a new message with a miracle.

God can never be suppos'd often to permit miracles to be done for the confirmation of a false or pretended mission: and if at any time he does permit miracles to be wrought in confirmation of a pretended mission, we have directions from the Old Testament not to regard such miracles; but are to continue firm to the antecedent revelation confirm'd by miracles, and contain'd in the Old Testament, notwithstanding any miracles; which . . . under the circumstance of attesting something contrary to an antecedent revelation, confirm'd by miracles, are certainly no proofs of the truth.²⁹⁸

This is an interesting interpretation of Deuteronomy 13. It allowed Collins to undercut the possibility that the miracles of Jesus could be used to establish the truth of Christianity. It also separates Deuteronomy 13: 1-5 and Matthew 24:24. Every argument that has been considered up to this point has accepted that these passages confront the same problem.

²⁹⁷ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 32.

²⁹⁸ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 32.

Collins maintained that if we take Deuteronomy seriously then we have ground to question whether the miracles reported in the New Testament do anything in themselves to support the New Testament revelation. At best, those New Testament miracles that fulfill Old Testament prophecies could do this job, and they would not need to be truly miraculous events to do that. They would only need to be out-of-the-ordinary events that have been foretold. Insofar as the miracle instead serves as a sign of a superior power authenticating a revealed message, Deuteronomy claims it could as well be the work of the devil as of God.

Today, we are apt to look at this dialectic and ask whether attempting to rest Christianity on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is any more viable than attempting to rest it on the miracles of Jesus. If the veracity of the events reported in the New Testament is called into question, then the problems seem equally great either way. Just as the miracles Jesus is reported to have performed are called into question when the New Testament is called into question, so all the other details of his life are called into question. If his miracles could be forgeries, his entire life could be a forgery, concocted with the pre-conceived design of fulfilling Old Testament prophecies.

But what is easy for us to think today will not have been so easy to think in as profoundly religious a time and place as early 18th century Britain. It is not impossible that Collins would have thought along these lines. But if he did, he kept it to himself. If the history I have charted over the previous chapters is correct, the turn to the argument from fulfillment of prophecy was a natural reaction to a growing sense of desperation over the prospects for the argument from miracles. Collins clearly thought that the argument from the fulfillment of prophecy was no better. But he took a rather more cautious approach to making that point than to call the details of the life of Jesus into question. His approach was to insist, along with the growing new consensus, that the ultimate ground for Christianity *is* the completion of Biblical prophecy, but then to insinuate that no such thing is possible under the guise of explaining how it is possible. His ultimate goal was to produce an “allegorical” model for the relationship between the New and the Old Testaments that he intended to fail. This leads to his unstated conclusion that Christianity is groundless. For his argument to work properly Collins needed to reject all the other

possible grounds for Christianity. This is why he was concerned to reject the argument from miracles.

Any one example of a person arguing that miracles performed by Jesus can't form the grounds for the Christian religion, although interesting, doesn't mean very much. However, I would like to suggest that this was not a position that was held by Collins alone. It was much more widely held. On this topic, the examples that I give below should carry more weight on this point than that of Collins does. Collins was to ultimately argue that Christianity is groundless. The examples that I give below are of critics of Collins who maintained to the contrary that Christianity is well-grounded but nonetheless agreed with him that Miracles cannot form those grounds.

The first example comes from Thomas Sherlock's (1678-1761) book *The Use and Intent of Prophecy, in the Several Ages of the World*, which saw print in at least six editions between 1725 and 1755. This book was first written in response to Collins's *Grounds and Reasons*. Sherlock is also the author of *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*, which was written as a response to Thomas Woolston's *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Savior*.²⁹⁹ Sherlock was a person whom Collins often engaged with.

Now one of the Characters, which our Saviour constantly assumes and claims in the Gospel, is this, That he is the Person spoken of by Moses and the Prophets. Whether he is this Person or no, must be try'd by the Words of Prophecy; and this makes the Argument from Prophecy so far necessary to establish the Claim of the Gospel; and it has been very justly, as well as acutely observed, that the Proof of this Point must rely entirely on the Evidence of Prophecy. Miracles in this Case can afford no Help; If the Prophets have not spoken of Christ, all the Miracles in the World will not prove that they have spoken of him.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ See Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 14-20 for one example of the use of this text by Woolston.

³⁰⁰ Thomas Sherlock. *The Use and Intent of Prophecy, in the Several Ages of the World*, J. Pemberton: London, 1725, Page 49.

A second example comes from Arthur Ashley Sykes (1684-1756) who wrote *An Essay Upon the Truth of the Christian Religion*, which was first printed in 1725 and then reprinted and expanded in 1755. This book, like Sherlock's, was written first as a Response to Collins's *Grounds and Reasons*.

There are, I know, a great many Persons, who conceive that Christianity is sufficiently proved to be true, if the Miracles and Resurrection of Jesus are true; even without any regard to the Prophecies so often appealed to by him. But supposing the Miracles to be true; yet no Miracles can prove that which is false in itself to be true. If therefore the Messiah be not foretold in the Old Testament, No Miracles can prove *Jesus* to be the *Messiah* foretold: Nay 'tis a stronger Argument to prove Jesus to be an Impostor, that He appealed to Prophecies which were not Prophecies, and by that means impos'd upon the Ignorant People; that 'tis, that He came from God merely because he work'd Miracles.³⁰¹

At least around 1724, the claim that Christianity should be grounded in the completion of biblical prophecy had significant support. Along with this, there were many arguments against grounding the truth of Christianity on the truth of miracles. This was a unique, but short-lived period in the early modern English debate about revealed religion. Its quick demise is in large part due to the work of Anthony Collins.

3.2.3 Problems with grounding Christianity in prophecy alone

If the truth of Christianity is grounded in the prophecy of the Old Testament being carried out in the New Testament it would seem that there should be nothing easier than checking the truth of the New Testament against the Old. It should simply require flipping through the New Testament, comparing it to the Old Testament and then—if they match correctly—Christianity is true. Collins recognized that it may, on the surface, seem this easy:

³⁰¹ Arthur Ashley Sykes. *An Essay Upon the Truth of the Christian Religion*, James and John Knapton: London, 1725, Page 2.

Of the strength or weakness of the proofs for christianity out of the Old Testament we seem well qualify'd to judge, by having the Old and New Testament in our hands; the first containing the proofs of christianity, and the latter the application of those proofs. And we should seem to have nothing more to do, but to compare the Old and New Testament together.³⁰²

The process is not quite this straight forward however. It turns out that some of the time the connection between the prophecy that is foretold in the Old Testament and how it is fulfilled in the New Testament is difficult to understand in an obvious and literal way. Collins provided six examples of this problem that can be, for the most part, broken down into three different types of problems. The first problem is when prophecy from the Old Testament seems to have been already fulfilled in the time of the Old Testament. The second is when passages from the Old Testament are used in the New Testament as prophecy but, when considered in their Old Testament context, the passages do not obviously appear to be intended as prophecy. The third problem is when quotations in the New Testament are said to have come directly from the Old Testament but no such quotation can be found in the Old Testament.

The paradigm example of the first problem involves the prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus. The verse from the Old Testament that presents this prophecy is Isaiah 7:10-14. The corresponding verse in the New Testament is Matthew 1:20-23.

Old Testament: Isaiah 7: 10-14

(10) Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, **(11)** “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

(12) But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

(13) Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? **(14)** Therefore the

³⁰² [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 39.

Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

New Testament: Matthew 1.20-23

(20) But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. (21) She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

(22) All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: (23) “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel.”³⁰³

The verse from the Old Testament describes an interaction between Ahaz, King of Judah, and the prophet Isaiah. The verse from the New Testament makes an explicit claim that the birth of Jesus fulfills the prophecy made in the verse from Isaiah. According to Collins, the correspondence between these texts is vexed for a number of reasons. This example is in fact among the most difficult for those interested in grounding Christianity in an “exact completion” of biblical prophecy to deal with.

One problem is how to understand the word that in Christian texts is normally translated “virgin.” The original Hebrew word is “*almah*” which is normally translated as “young woman.” However, in the Septuagint—which is an early Greek translation of the Hebrew scripture—the word “*almah*” was translated as “*parthenos*” which, is one of the Greek words for “virgin.”³⁰⁴ This slight shift in translation allowed Matthew to cite the passage in Isaiah as if it read, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son.” However, it is more consistent with the original Hebrew to read this passage as saying “The young woman will conceive and give birth to a son.” Collins made this point,

³⁰³ I am using the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

³⁰⁴ Perhaps because he didn’t know Hebrew, Collins’s account of this problem is not this sophisticated. This discussion is informed by, Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the New*, Bloomsbury: London, 3.

further observing that “young woman” is much more consistent with the context that is presented in Isaiah. Isaiah was attempting to prompt Ahaz to take military action against the Assyrians. That required appealing to a propitious sign that would have to be imminently evident. “That young woman will show herself to be with child” would do better than the outcome of an event some seven centuries in the future.

This brings up a more serious concern. Isaiah’s prophecy seems to have actually been fulfilled in the time of Isaiah. Understanding this passage as a prophecy that was literally fulfilled with the birth of Jesus means that Isaiah must have been asking Ahaz to take military action based on an auspicious omen that had yet to be observed, and would not be observed for another 700 years. There is another way to make sense of this passage. It can be read as a piece of prophecy that was intended to be fulfilled both in the time of Ahaz and in the time of the New Testament. However, to read it this way is to stretch the common rules of reasoning as well as the understanding of what a “direct” relationship between the Old and New Testament should be. Collins was only too happy to pursue just such a solution.

Collins wasn’t the first to notice the problem with the literal fulfillment of this prophecy. Whiston traced doubts about the literal fulfillment of the prophecy to Jerome, and pointed to Grotius as the first of the “moderns” to express the view.³⁰⁵ O’Higgins suggests that this wasn’t a view that Grotius actually held, though at the time it was thought that Grotius held.³⁰⁶ James Force, following *The Cambridge History of the Bible* traces the doubts back to third century Christian Platonists.³⁰⁷ When the prophecy is understood in the context of the Old Testament it needs to be interpreted in one way, the direct way, according to which it offers an immediately observable omen to Ahaz. However, it must be understood in a different way when it is applied to Jesus. It can’t also be understood in the direct way when applied to Jesus because the prophecy was already fulfilled in

³⁰⁵ William Whiston, *A Supplement to the Literal Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies*, London, 1725, 4-5.

³⁰⁶ James O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The Man and His Work*, The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, 156-160.

³⁰⁷ Force, *William Whiston*, 77.

Ahaz's time. To apply the prophecy to Jesus it needs to be understood in a second or spiritual way.

The second problem Collins raised is that what is said to be prophecy in the New Testament, does not always appear to have been so intended in the Old Testament context. An example of this is Matthew 2:15 which claims that the prophecy "Out of Egypt have I call'd my son" (purportedly Hoseah 11:1) was fulfilled. However, when the the referenced passage in Hoseah is consulted, there is no suggestion that these words were intended to be taken as prophecy.

The third problem is that sometimes, something that is claimed in the New Testament to have fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy actually appears nowhere in the Old Testament. An example is Matthew 2.23, which claims that the prophecy, "He shall be call'd a Nazarene" was fulfilled. However, nothing even close to "He shall be calle'd a Nazarene" appears anywhere in the Old Testament.

Collins gave a number of other examples that are variations on these three problems. In light of them he concluded:

In fine, the prophesies cited from the Old Testament by the authors of the New, do so plainly relate, in their obvious and primary sense, to other matters than those which they are produc'd to prove; that to pretend they prove, in that sense, what they are produc'd to prove, is, to give up the cause of christianity to the Jews and other enemies thereof; who can so easily show, in so many undoubted instances, the Old and New Testament to have no manner of connection in that respect, but to be in an irreconcilable state.³⁰⁸

3.2.4 William Whiston's solution to this problem

William Whiston was well aware of these problems. His *Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament And For Vindication the Citations made thence in the*

³⁰⁸ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 48.

New Testament of 1722 attempts to respond to them by charging that the text of the Old Testament has been corrupted, and providing directions for its reconstruction. Had it been successful, Whiston's project would have salvaged the project of finding an exact completion of Old Testament prophecy in the new testament. This work may well have been what motivated Collins to write *Grounds and Reasons*.

Whiston was born on December 9th 1667 in Norton-juxta-Twycross, Leicestershire. He was educated at Clare College, Cambridge where he received his MA in 1693. He met and became friends with Isaac Newton in 1694. This friendship lasted for about twenty years before the two had a falling out. Whiston's first book *A New Theory of the Earth* (1696) argued that the scriptural accounts of the creation, the flood, and the final conflagration were agreeable to reason and philosophy. With Newton's support, Whiston was elected the third Lucasian professor of mathematics at Cambridge in 1702. In his scientific writing from this time Whiston was able to provide more accessible treatments of Newtonian astronomy, physics, and mathematics than the *Principia*. Whiston also did a great deal of work on prophecy, including publishing *Essay on the Revelation* (1706) and his Boyle lecture for 1707, *The Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies* (published in 1708). In 1710 he was expelled from his professorship at Cambridge because of his anti-trinitarian views.³⁰⁹

As he established in his *New Theory of the Earth*, Whiston was interested in arguing that "The obvious or Literal sense of Scripture is the True and Real one, where no evident reason can be given to the contrary."³¹⁰ In his Boyle lecture of 1707 he argued that Jesus fulfilled a number of biblical prophecies literally, non-allegorically, and historically. This completion of prophecy showed God's special providence through his continued involvement in the world.³¹¹ Because of the new science, descriptions of the laws of

³⁰⁹ Stephen D. Snobelen, 'Whiston, William (1667–1752)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/article/29217, accessed 6 Aug 2017]

³¹⁰ Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth*, 1708, 95. Force cites this passage a number of times including Force, *William Whiston*, 63-64.

³¹¹ Force, *William Whiston*, 64.

nature were becoming so detailed that there was not much room left for miraculous events. Grounding Christianity in fulfilled prophecy, on the other hand, allowed a way to show God's continued influence in the world without needing to rely on miracles. An event need merely have been foretold, and sufficiently idiosyncratic not to be frequently repeated, not necessarily miraculous in itself.³¹²

Whiston was not happy with allegorical or typical interpretations of biblical prophecy. The language of prophets can be enigmatic. However, following well-developed hermeneutic principles Whiston believed that the literal and historical fulfillment of biblical prophecy could be established without any need for resorting to allegorical meaning.³¹³ For Whiston, this method was an extension of the Newtonian worldview, which, like Newton's own philosophy, proposed to replace "hypotheses" with "real Facts, and original Records."³¹⁴ This approach worked well enough for many prophecies. However, there were still some that resisted the approach. On Whiston's view, the problems with the literal interpretation of these passages are due to corruptions of the original version of the text. His solution to this problem was to set out a method for recovering a less corrupt version. He hoped that a less corrupt version of the text would resolve all remaining problems. The process for accomplishing this task was set out in the *Essay*.

According to Whiston, most of the text of the Old Testament is not corrupt. However, in the case of the few difficult passages, changes were deliberately made in order to disrupt the connection between the Old and the New Testament. In the second century AD, Jewish religious leaders compiled the text that became the traditional or Masoretic version of the Old Testament. Whiston maintained that, during this process, the copyists intentionally introduced corruptions into the text. The corruption had to be intentional because so many of the passages "prove to be in Texts, wherein the Christian Religion

³¹² Force, *William Whiston*, 70.

³¹³ Force, *William Whiston*, 71-77 ties this method directly to Newton.

³¹⁴ Whiston, *Supplement*, 5.

and the ancient Christian quotations are concerned.”³¹⁵ Whiston had a better reason for concluding that the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament had corruptions. There is a wide variety of variations between the different extant versions of the earliest copies of the text.³¹⁶

To prove that recovering the true text of the Old Testament would remove the problems with literal interpretation, Whiston applied his method to the case of Matthew and Isaiah. He used a version of the text from the *Apostolical Constitutions* that he thought was older than the Masoretic version, and so was less corrupt. In this version of the text the passage from Isaiah is rearranged. The birth of a child in Ahaz’s time is a separate event from the prophecy that a virgin would conceive a son called Immanuel.³¹⁷ This allows a literal interpretation of the prophecy and avoids the problem of needing to understand one event fulfilling two examples of prophecy in different times. It has since been discovered that the *Apostolical Constitutions* is a fourth-century forgery. Nonetheless, many of the texts that Whiston suggested should form the basis of a less corrupt version of the Old Testament are still in use by scholars today. In addition, a number of the strategies he suggested for establishing a less corrupt text are also still in use.³¹⁸ Although, Whiston’s basic strategy was sound—and perhaps even groundbreaking—the modern results have tended to cut against the conclusions that he hoped it would provide. As the “true” text of the Old Testament has been restored many of the interpretive problems involving the completion of prophecy remain.

Although the suggestion that the problems with interpreting biblical prophecy in an obvious or literal sense come about because of corruptions in the text of the Old Testament may seem extreme, Whiston’s method for solving the problem was well reasoned. He thought that because of the number of examples of prophecy that could be

³¹⁵ William Whiston, *An Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament And for Vindicating the Citations made thence in the New Testament*, London, 1722, 115; See also Force, *William Whiston*, 80.

³¹⁶ Force, *William Whiston*, 80.

³¹⁷ Force, *William Whiston*, 81.

³¹⁸ For a very spirited defense of the value of Whiston’s method see Force, *William Whiston*, 81-83.

understood in a literal way, it was reasonable that they all should be. His solution was to turn to the earliest extant physical copies of the Holy Scripture in order to try to find his solution. In addition his method offers a clean answer to the third problem that I outlined above. In the examples of proposed prophecy in the New Testament that cannot be found in the Old Testament, the original references have simply been lost.

3.2.5 Collins's "Solution" for grounding Christianity in Biblical Prophecy

On the surface, Collins's offered an argument for why Christianity should be grounded in the allegorical completion of prophecy. He came to this conclusion after raising the problems outlined earlier. However, it turns out that allegorical reasoning can be used to prove anything. So, although Collins appeared to be presenting an argument for the truth of the Christian revelation, what he was instead doing was presenting an argument that undermines what he had earlier proven to be the only eligible foundation for the Christian revelation.

Collins's solution to the problems that arise with the exact completion of biblical prophecy was to instead suggest that prophecy ought to be considered to have been satisfied allegorically. On this view difficult passages need to be understood in a "secondary, or typical, or mystical, or allegorical, or enigmatical sense, that is, in a sense different from the obvious and literal sense."³¹⁹ For Collins this is the only way to show that the prophecy of the Old Testament is properly fulfilled in the New Testament. In direct aim at Whiston's proposal, he went so far as to say, "taking the present Old Testament for genuine, it is impossible to account for those citations on any other foundation than on the allegorical scheme."³²⁰

According to the common rules of reasoning "an author has but one meaning at a time to a proposition (which is to be found out by a critical examination of his words)." We are accordingly obliged "to cite that proposition from him, and argue from it in that one

³¹⁹ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons* 40.

³²⁰ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons* 50.

meaning.”³²¹ This is not the way that allegorical reasoning proceeds. Because of the types of propositions that are being dealt with, the rules of allegorical reasoning are complicated and hard to understand. This makes discovering the rules difficult unless those crafting the analogy have been so considerate as to provide a key or at least some hints for the reconstruction of their meaning. Unfortunately for us, the rules that the authors of the New Testament used to direct their allegorical reasoning have been lost. But, that does not mean that they cannot be reconstructed. Collins introduced Surenhusius, a Hebrew professor in Amsterdam, who wrote *βίβλος Κατλλης* (1713). Although Collins had this book in his library he largely used a long review in Michel de la Roche’s literary journal, *Memoirs of Literature* as his source.³²² Surenhusius’s work took up the task of reconstructing the lost rules of allegorical reasoning.

This project was inspired by Surenhusius’s encounter with a Rabbi in Amsterdam who was well trained in Jewish allegorical methods. Surenhusius was surprised to discover that using these rules enabled the Rabbi to reconstruct the text of various prophecies to make the correspondence between the Old and the New Testament clear.³²³ This led Surenhusius to study hundreds of old Hebrew texts and convince himself that he had discovered how to piece together the rules that the apostles used when applying their allegorical reasoning to the Old Testament. He presented his findings in a four-volume book. Among the rules that Surenhusius presented in these four volumes, is the following, from the first book:

Thus a different sense is imply’d in each of the following forms of quoting used by the sacred writers of the New Testament: it has been said: it is written: that it might be fulfill’d: which was spoken: the scripture says: see what is said: the

³²¹ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons* 51.

³²² For an extended discussion of both La Roche and Surenhusius see David Ruderman. “The Study of the Mishnah and the Quest for Christian Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England,” *The Legacies of Richard Popkin*, (ed.) Jeremy Popkin, Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2008.

³²³ For more on this see Ruderman, “The Study of the Mishnah,” 128-129.

scripture foreseseeing: is it not written: wherefore he says: have you never read: what says the scripture; as he spoke &c.³²⁴

And then from the third book:

To that end the jewish doctors used ten ways of citing and explaining the Old Testament; which for their curiosity and importance, I shall here recite at large after my author.

1. The first is, “reading words, not according to the points plac’d under them, but according to other points substituted in their stead; [. . .]
8. The eighth is, “changing the order of words;
9. The ninth is, “changing the order of words, and adding other words;”³²⁵

From these examples it might start to seem like something funny is going on. Up to this point in the *Grounds and Reasons* Collins had argued that allegorical reasoning is the only consistent way to make sense of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. However, it begins to become clear that Surenhusius’s method of allegorical reasoning is so flexible that it can be used to invent a correspondence between any two passages from the Old and the New Testament. Although this was not Surenhusius’s intention, Collins did everything he could to flag the result without actually stating it in so many words. The real project is evidenced by a joke about the secrets Surenhusius learned from the Rabbi:

Thus by a most lucky accident of Mr. Surenhusius’s meeting and *conference* with a learned allegorical *Rabbin*, are the *rules* by which the apostles cited and apply’d the Old Testament, discover’d to the world; to which they had been for several ages lost. . . Which *conferences* seems not, in its nature and consequence, much unlike that between LUTHER and the devil. LUTHER reports himself to have had frequent conferences with the devil; in one of which he pretend’d

³²⁴ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 57.

³²⁵ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 59-60.

from him the *arguments* for the *abolition of the sacrifice of the mass*. . . The *Rabbin* establishes christianity; and the *devil* protestanism!³²⁶

There are a number of passages like this, including

It is indeed possible, that in the application of the jewish *rules* of interpretation and reasoning to the passages cited and urg'd by the apostles out of the Old Testament, he may not always have hit upon those peculiar *rules*, which the apostle had, in every citation, more particularly in view: for many of those *rules* will equally serve the same purpose; and therefore those, which he does not on some occasion make use of, may have been the *rules*, which the apostles had in view, as also those, which he does make use of, may not sometimes be the *rules*, which the apostles had immediately in view.³²⁷

By way of expanding on the success of Surenhusius's method, Collins allowed that even if Surenhusius's interpretation of the passages cited may not have always been a completely accurate rendering of the apostles intentions, many of the rules are so powerful that any of them can be employed to yield the preferred result. This makes them interchangeable and so there is not much problem with having mixed them up! It is a small thing to notice, but Collins italicized every use of the word "rule" in the above paragraph, as well as in the previous paragraph cited. It is as if he was sneering at the "rules" of allegorical reasoning—which are, in fact, not rule-like at all.

Collins was very careful to never explicitly declare that Surenhusius's analysis of allegorical reasoning raises any problems for the grounding of Christianity. According to what he himself had declared to be the common rules of reasoning we are supposed to understand an author as having but "one meaning at a time to a proposition" and that this meaning is supposed to be discovered through a "critical examination" of that author's words. By this standard, Collins could have claimed that what he was trying to say was

³²⁶ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 60-61. This quote is also included in the entry on Collins in John Drury, *Critics of the Bible 1724-1873*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 22.

³²⁷ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 77.

no more and no less than what he did say. By the literal meaning of his words he claimed that allegorical reasoning is the only way to understand the relationship between the Old and the New Testament, and that this relationship is the only way to ground Christianity. Moreover, it is a method that achieves everything that could possibly be hoped for (and more). Ironically, if we want to find a further, anti-Christian message in Collins's text, we are forced to follow Surenhusius and interpret it allegorically. This provided Collins with what might today be called "plausible deniability." In a court of law, the standards of evidence are higher than in the court of public opinion. To legally prove that an author has said something prohibited by law, more is required than just to claim that such a construal might be placed on the author's words. One needs that there is no plausibility to the author's denial of having intended to say that thing.

Collins did not ignore the court of public opinion, either. In addition to providing for plausible deniability, he wrote all of his works anonymously. With the exception of his correspondence with Samuel Clarke, he also wrote every work in the voice of an author who had not written any of the previous works. He regularly responded to his own books as if he were a different author commenting on the earlier author's efforts. He sometimes did this in order to try to clarify previous arguments without having to answer for the "original author's" intentions. At other times he seems to be interested in leading readers away from his conclusions. While his authorship of his books seems not to have been much of a secret, he nowhere acknowledged, and often explicitly denied having written anything, even in private correspondence. For example, a letter of July 30, 1719 to William Homan, who was doing research for a volume on the history of Essex contains the following:

As to what you desire in relation to my self; I am by no means a proper subject for you, who am not Essex man born, am but lately established in this Country, and own no Anonymous writings that have been attributed to me.³²⁸

³²⁸ Anthony Collins, *The Correspondence of Anthony Collins (1676-1729)*, Freethinker, (ed.) James Dybikowski, Paris: Honéré Chapion, 2011. Letter #120 pg. 306-307.

Given the fact that most people seemed to know who the author of various publications was, in spite of the anonymous authorship, there seem to have been unstated rules prohibiting the identification of the authors of anonymous works in print up to the point where the author either died or chose to identify themselves in print. This will have allowed the authors of infamous works to continue to appear in good company.

3.2.6 The legacy of Collins's arguments against Prophecy

3.2.6.1 Samuel Clarke

After the publication of the *Grounds and Reasons* prominent English divines began to reassess how arguments from prophecy fit into their defenses of Christianity. One example comes from Samuel Clarke. In his 1705 Boyle lectures Clarke had argued for an exact completion of biblical prophecy.

The Divine Authority of the Christian Revelation, is positively and directly proved, by the *Exact Completion both of all those Prophecies that went before concerning our Lord, and of those that He himself delivered concerning things that were to happen after.*³²⁹

But in 1725 Clarke wrote *A Discourse concerning the Connexion of the Prophecies in the Old Testament*. This book was on one hand a new edition of the arguments from his second Boyle lecture, and on the other a response to Collins and the *Grounds and Reasons*. In this new work Clarke instead claimed that indirect prophecies were no longer intended to be a proof that Jesus was the Messiah. Instead they should only be understood as an indispensable ingredient or *sine qua non* that this is the case.

The Application of this *latter sort* of Prophecies [indirect prophecies] to Christ, was never by *reasonable Men* urged as being itself a *Proof* that *Jesus* was the true *Messiah*. Nay, the Application of the most *direct* and *express* Prophecies whatsoever, has not of itself the nature of a *direct or positive Proof*; but can only

³²⁹ This quote comes from Clarke, Samuel (1716). *A Discourse Concerning the unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, London. 317.

be a *sine qua non*, an Application of certain Marks or Characters, without which no person *could be* the promised *Messiah*; An Application of certain *Directions or Descriptions*, to be made use of in the *Inquiring* after a particular person.³³⁰

Here we see a prominent Christian intellectual moving away from grounding Christianity in the fulfillment of prophecy, and doing so as part of what is explicitly a response to Collins's *Grounds and Reasons*. Clarke was the pre-eminent English theologian of the time, and led others in retreating from prophecy.³³¹

3.2.6.2 Thomas Woolston and Thomas Sherlock

Thomas Woolston wrote another early response that highlights the immediate impact of Collins's work. Although he had been developing his own account of the allegorical interpretation of scripture for some time, Woolston used the publication of *The Grounds and Reasons* to extend the allegorical interpretation to include Jesus's miracles. In his work *Moderator between Infidel and an Apostate* (1725) Woolston attacked the literal interpretation of Jesus's miracles, including the literal interpretation of the resurrection and the virgin birth.³³² For Woolston, Jesus's miracles were not actual events, but should instead be understood allegorically. Collins, in contrast, was happy to grant that Jesus's miracles had actually occurred. He instead argued that even so, the performance of miracles was meaningless if Jesus did not properly fulfill Old Testament prophecy. In an introductory note to *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1726), Collins's noted Woolston's book as well as two others written by Woolston on a list of early responses to the *Grounds and Reasons*.³³³ Unlike Collins who was careful to disguise parts of his argument, and published his work anonymously, Woolston's attack was brazen and published using his name. The attorney general Charles Yorke moved to prosecute

³³⁰ Samuel Clarke. *A Discourse concerning the Connexion of the Prophecies in the Old Testament and the Application of them to Christ*, London, 1725, 23.

³³¹ This account of the change to Clarke's Boyle lectures comes from O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 175-176.

³³² William H. Trapnell, 'Woolston, Thomas (bap. 1668, d. 1733)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/article/29963, accessed 7 Aug 2017].

³³³ [Collins], *Scheme of Literal Prophecy considered*, introduction.

Woolston for blasphemy but Whiston persuaded York to drop the case.³³⁴ Whiston talked about this experience in *Memoirs of the life and writings of Mr. William Whiston*.³³⁵ At the end of this discussion, Whiston brought up Collins by name and commented that Collins work had encouraged Woolston to express his views.³³⁶

Woolston is probably most famous for his *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Savior* published between 1727-1729. He was eventually tried and found guilty of blasphemy for these works. The subtitle of the *First Discourse: In View of the Present Controversy between Infidels and Apostates* suggests that he—at least in part—saw his work expanding on the controversy that Collins had started with the *Grounds and Reasons*.

Another interesting connection is that Thomas Sherlock responded to the *Six Discourses* with *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*. This work is generally understood to be a defense of the miracles of Christ.³³⁷ However, Sherlock was one of the authors who agreed with Collins's claim that Christianity needed to be grounded in biblical prophecy. This suggests one of two things. It may suggest that Sherlock changed his view between 1725 when he wrote his response to Collins and 1729 when he wrote his response to Woolston. It is entirely possible that at the time he was responding to Collins he still held high hopes for the use of biblical prophecy as a way to ground Christianity. Because Sherlock's initial response to Collins was shortly after the publication of *The Grounds and Reasons* he may have abandoned biblical prophecy later when it became clear that it would no longer be a suitable ground for Christianity. It is also possible that the extreme version of the allegorical interpretation in Woolston's *Six Discourses* may have led to Sherlock changing his view.

However, it is also possible that Sherlock maintained his commitment to the completion of biblical prophecy and that the view that he is presenting in the *Tryal* is more complex

³³⁴ Trapnell, "Woolston," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

³³⁵ William Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writing of William Whiston, M. A.*, London, 1753, 197-201.

³³⁶ Whiston, *Memoirs*, 201.

³³⁷ See for example Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 15-17.

and nuanced that is usually understood. Woolston was interested in arguing that Jesus's miracles had never taken place. Sherlock's response to this was instead to argue that the evidence suggests that they had. Sherlock could be arguing for this conclusion in order to defeat Woolston's argument and yet still think that Jesus's miracles would not form a suitable ground for Christianity, or if they did, it was only to the extent that they fulfilled prophecy. Either way, fully developing Sherlock's view as a response first to Collins and later to Woolston will change the way that we understand the place of the *Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* in the early modern discussion of miracles and revealed religion.³³⁸

3.2.6.3 David Hume

The historical landscape that I have presented may seem strange to people familiar with the Humean critique of miracles. On any interpretation of Hume's account of miracles his concern was with establishing whether human testimony could ever be adequate to convince a wise person that a miraculous event has occurred. He is generally understood to have raised significant problems for the claim that it could, though interpreters differ on whether he meant to rule it out altogether (either on a priori or a posteriori grounds) or allow for special cases where religion is not concerned, or simply make a compelling case against all extant historical testimony to the occurrence of miracles. However, I have shown that by the 1720's arguments like those presented by Hume would not have been considered to be largely beside the point. This not just because as Collins had argued in the *Grounds and Reasons*, establishing that a miracle had occurred would not "avail any thing in the case: for *miracles* can never render a foundation valid, which is in itself invalid; can never make a false inference true; can never make a *prophecy* fulfill'd, which is not fulfill'd, and can never mark out a Messiah, or Jesus for the Messiah, if both are not mark'd out in the Old Testament."³³⁹ Collins's argument was just the culmination of a history of failed attempts to explain how revelation might be supported by miracles. It is

³³⁸ See Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 16-18 for his understanding Sherlock's place in the historical debate.

³³⁹ [Collins], *Grounds and Reasons*, 31-32.

not that Hume's arguments would have been completely useless. They just would have seemed anti-climactic.

The fact that Hume's argument excited as much controversy as it did suggests that a significant shift between 1724 when Collins first published *The Ground and Reasons* and everyone seemed to agree that miracles were not decisive, and 1748 when Hume published the first edition of the *Enquiry* that contained his chapter "Of Miracles." What is often missed in historical accounts of the developments of arguments leading up to Hume is that Hume's arguments would not have been as potent had Collins not made it necessary for divines to return to a reliance on the argument from miracles. What is puzzling, however, is that although they clearly fell out of favor following Collins's critique, arguments for grounding Christianity in the completion of biblical prophecy were not entirely off the radar, even in Hume's day. William Whiston did not die until 1752 and was actively writing until his death. Arthur Ashley Sykes lived until 1756 and published an expanded edition of his work responding to Collins in 1755. The last edition of Sherlock's response to Collins was also printed in 1755 and Sherlock lived until 1761. Given this it is surprising that these arguments seem to be nowhere in Hume's account or in the voluminous literature immediately responding to Hume's account. Hume himself, when he mentioned prophecy, mentioned it only as a species of miracle, as if the only purpose that the fulfillment of prophecy could serve would be to prove that the prophet was speaking with divine authority. A recognition that a fulfillment of a prophet's predictions might serve, not to validate the prophet, but to validate the person bringing the prophet's prediction to pass is entirely absent from Hume's consciousness. For all that, the extent to which his scholarly references to ancient and modern literature copy so many of Collins's own (discussed in an earlier note) suggests that he may have been well versed in Collins's works.

There is much work to be done investigating the details of this historical shift. I think that we start to see the beginning of this shift in Sherlock's response to Woolston. I suggested that it is possible that Sherlock argued as he did not because he needed to establish that Jesus's miracles had taken place in order to establish the truth of Christianity, but instead because he was trying to refute someone who was arguing that they had never happened.

In this case that Jesus's miracles took place would have more to do with establishing that the events happened rather than that the events were in fact miracles. I suspect that Joseph Butler made another important step in this historical shift. Butler wrote the *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* in 1736. In this work, Butler challenged the deists on empirical grounds. By doing this he changed the focus of the discussion of revealed religion toward issues of probability about the occurrence of both natural and religious events. I suspect that this change toward issues of probability is more important prehistory opening the way for the argument that we find in Hume. Regardless of the exact details of this shift, it is clear that Hume owed a debt to Anthony Collins. Collins's astute attack on arguments attempting to ground Christianity in the completion of biblical prophecy caused these arguments to fall out of favor. This certainly helped clear the way for "Of Miracles."

3.2.7 Conclusion

In early modern England, the argument from miracles was a popular way to establish the divinity of a revealed message. In this dissertation I argue that by the first-third of the eighteenth-century this argument reached a crisis point that led thinkers to abandon it in favor of the argument from prophecy. I further argue that this alternative was short lived because of the work of Anthony Collins.

On a basic version of the argument from miracles, a revealed message is verified as in fact coming from God because of the occurrence of a miraculous event. I have shown that in the last half of the 17th century thinkers were struggling with a problem with this basic version of the argument from miracles brought about by biblical passages in Deuteronomy and Matthew. These passages bring up the possibility that a non-divine revelation could be verified by a miracle. In the first chapter I show that in response to this concern, Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle attempted to develop a non-circular way to establish the divinity of a miracle by appealing to independent criteria to establish the authority of the Holy Scripture. In addition, I argued that for Hobbes these criteria changed between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*. The solution that Hobbes and Boyle present is subject to what I call the "establishment problem." In the second chapter, I show that William Fleetwood and Benjamin Hoadly respond to the establishment

problem by claiming that either, only God can perform miracles (Fleetwood), or the miracles that God does perform are powerful enough that we will always know that they come from God (Hoadly). Locke responded to these rival attempts in *A Discourse of Miracles*. He presented a subjective definition of a miracle that scuttled both Fleetwood's and Hoadly's arguments, which presuppose an objective standard for the existence and (for Hoadly) also the greatness of miracles. A consequence of Locke's argument, that he was well aware of, was that the argument from miracles could only provide *belief* in a revealed message not *knowledge* of it. This further degraded the argument from miracles. Because of these challenges, by the first-third of the eighteenth-century I show that thinkers began to abandon the argument from miracles in favor of the argument from prophecy. In the third chapter I presented the argument from prophecy and argued that its use as an alternative way to ground Christianity was short lived because of Anthony Collins. I show the impact of Collins's argument on Samuel Clarke, Thomas Woolston and Thomas Sherlock. I conclude by making the case that Anthony Collins's *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* was responsible for helping clear the way for David Hume's "Of Miracles."

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³⁴⁰ Two more editions for a total of three all printed in 1710.

³⁴¹ There are at least five editions all printed in 1713. One is identified as being printed in London but was actually printed in The Hague. This entry is the second edition with corrections. It has 178 pages. Gale # CW3318863121

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³⁴² First edition: [Collins, Anthony], *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered*, (2 vol.) T.J.: London, 1726. (O'Higgins identifies the first edition as actually printed in The Hague.)

³⁴³ There are two editions printed in 1727: 108 pages: Gale #CW3323281048, and 143 pages: Gale #CW3320099015. I use the 143-page edition.

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