

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences*  
*Humanities & Social Sciences papers*

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Bond University

Year 1999

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Prophecy, Early-Modern Apologetics,  
and Hume's Argument against Miracles

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# Prophecy, Early Modern Apologetics, and Hume's Argument Against Miracles

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"What we have said of miracles may be applied, without any variation, to prophecies; and indeed, all prophecies are real miracles, and as such only, can be admitted as proofs of any revelation." <sup>1</sup> David Hume's celebrated account of miracles concludes with an elegant symmetry: the argument against miracles applies equally to prophecies, and thus the twin supports of revealed religion are demolished. For the most part commentators have taken Hume at his word, focusing their attentions on his probabilistic argument against belief in breaches of natural laws and assuming that if this argument is effective against miracles, it will apply equally to prophecies. Treatments of the arguments of section ten of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* thus concentrate almost exclusively on the miraculous.

In this paper I shall argue that both Hume and his commentators have tended to overlook the distinctive features of prophecy. Hume's chief objection to miracles--that one is never justified in crediting second-hand testimony to miraculous events--does not necessarily apply to the argument from fulfilled prophecies as it was understood in the eighteenth century. I shall further argue that at least some of the apologists for Christian revelation against whom Hume directed his arguments were aware of the kind of reasoning which Hume was to mount against the miraculous, and of the immunity of prophecies to this kind of attack. If we consider Hume's arguments in their historical context, then, we shall discover that not only do they fail to counter the argument from prophecies but that they were known to have failed. [End Page 241]

## I. Miracles, Prophecy, and Testimony

The chief argument of section ten of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, "Of Miracles," rests upon two conditions: that miracles are violations of laws of nature and that the miraculous events which are to be considered as evidence for the Christian revelation have not been directly observed. Hume points out that the "wise man" who "proportions his belief to the evidence" ought never accept a second-hand report of a miracle, for the testimony which established the laws of nature must of necessity outweigh testimony to the violation of those laws. <sup>2</sup> When this argument is applied to prophecies, however, two differences between the miraculous and the prophetic immediately present themselves: prophecies, in functioning as evidence for the Christian religion, need not rely upon second-hand testimony, nor need their fulfillment entail a violation of the laws of nature. The accomplishment of a prophecy, unlike past miracles, might be observed first hand in the present and may take the form of an historical event which is universally acknowledged to have taken place. In such a case the occurrence of the event itself would not in fact constitute a breach of the laws of nature.

That belief in the fulfillment of prophecies and occurrence of miracles rely respectively on different kinds of evidence was already clear to those some of those orthodox apologists to whom Hume's arguments were addressed. Christian virtuoso Robert Boyle (1627-91) had written in the previous century that prophecies "have a peculiar advantage above most other miracles, on the force of their duration; since the manifest proofs of the prediction continue still, and are as visible as the extent of the Christian religion." <sup>3</sup> Ralph Cudworth (1617-88), one of the leading Cambridge Platonists, agreed: [End Page 242]

Scripture Prophecies, *Of Christ* in the Old Testament; and *From* him in the New, are of equal if not greater force to us in this present Age for the Confirmation of the our Faith, than the miracles themselves recorded in Scripture, we having now certain knowledge our selves, of many of these events. <sup>4</sup>

Eighteenth-century writers were equally aware that the proof from prophecies was not founded upon fallible human traditions. Robert Clayton (1695-1758) referred to prophecy as "a strong and very extraordinary Proof, which offers itself daily before our Eyes."<sup>5</sup> Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), the most gifted theologian of his time, also pointed to the distinctive advantages of prophecies over miracles. In a sermon entitled "Scripture Evidence Sufficient to Make Men Religious" he concedes that the miracles of Jesus cannot effect us in the same way that they influenced his contemporaries: "The *Miracles* which our Savior worked, were *to his first Disciples, who were Eye-witnesses of them*, a complete Demonstration of the Truth of his Doctrine." He continues:

It is true, the Miracles of Christ, and particularly of his Resurrection, which was the greatest of all, is not such an ocular demonstration to After-generations.... But then on the other side, in some respects, we have the advantage even of *Them*; We have the Examination of many Ages, the Answers to the Objections of all sorts of Adversaries, the Judgment of the wisest and most considerate Men that have gone before us, and the Evidence of several of the Lord's prophecies since that time fulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

Later generations of believers, who for obvious reasons are unable to be direct witnesses of the miracles of Christ, are compensated by the availability of a range of philosophical arguments (which establish the truths of natural religion) and by prophecies (which attest to the general truth of the Christian revelation). The advantage of prophecies over miracles lies in the fact that the fulfillment of prophecy provides an "ocular demonstration" in a way that no historical report of a miracle can. The events which represent the fulfillment of prophecies, unlike past miracles, need not be reported secondhand; for one may be a direct **[End Page 243]** witness to their fulfillment. Alternatively, the uncontested verdict of history may establish that a particular prophecy has been accomplished in the past.<sup>7</sup>

The superiority of prophecies in this regard meant that in practice the argument from miracles was almost invariably accompanied by the argument from prophecy. This was not because they amounted to the same thing but rather because the latter did not suffer from the limitations of the former. "Miracles alone," Cudworth had acknowledged, "are not sufficient confirmation of a true prophet."<sup>8</sup> Nor, it was widely admitted, could miracles convince an atheist.<sup>9</sup> Together, however, miracles and accomplished prophecies could give a moral certainty of the truth of Christianity to the contemporary believer. Though not a direct witness to the signs and wonders which identified Jesus as a special emissary of God, the contemporary believer could nonetheless be satisfied that certain prophecies made in the past had been fulfilled in the present. Moreover, when such prophecies were associated with a miracle-worker, they lent additional credibility to a reputation for the performance of miracles. Arthur Ashley Sykes (1684?-1756), a Latitudinarian divine and friend of Clarke's, serves as a typical example of how the greater certainty of prophecies might reinforce the weaker argument from miracles. "Prophecy," Sykes insisted, "is like a standing miracle of which we ourselves are certain judges; and the appeal lies, not to the eyes of those who lived many hundreds of years ago, but to our own faculties." Accordingly, when prophecies of some supposed miracle-worker are accomplished, "one cannot disbelieve the accounts which we have of their miracles, unless some direct and positive proof, and not merely a conjectural one, could be produced against them."<sup>10</sup> **[End Page 244]**

The impression that miracles and prophecy bore a different evidential weight seems to have been widely acknowledged in the eighteenth century, even by those outside theological circles. Samuel Johnson, for example, remarked to his friend Boswell that Hume was substantially correct in his argument against miracles but that this did not apply to Christianity which was supported by miracles *and* prophecies. Boswell reports:

Talking of Dr. Johnson's unwillingness to believe extraordinary things, I ventured to say, "Sir, you come near Hume's argument against miracles, 'That it is more probable certain witnesses should lie, or be mistaken, than that they should happen.'" JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, Hume, taking the proposition simply, is right. But the Christian revelation is not proved by the miracles alone, but as connected with prophecies...."<sup>11</sup>

Hume would have been right, Johnson concedes, but for one thing: his argument is ineffectual against prophecies.

All of this suggests that the general problem of evaluating the credibility of second-hand testimony had been discussed well before Hume articulated his famous argument. We do not need to search far to find the reasons for this. The dual reformations in religion and learning which took place over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had together called into question the veracity of long-standing traditions which had been passed on from generation to generation. For practitioners of the new science, imbued as they were with the spirit of empiricism, the issue of the reliability of recorded observations of experiments, of travellers tales, of correspondence received from researchers abroad--all such matters relying upon human testimony--was of central importance; for in practice modern science relies not upon direct empirical evidence, but on reports of what is observed. <sup>12</sup>

Of more immediate relevance is the fact that Protestant writers, as part of their general program to desacralize nature and demystify a Catholic tradition of **[End Page 245]** divinely-empowered priests and miracle-working saints, had asserted that the age of miracles had long passed. They argued that the putative miracles performed at sacred sites, during the course of the Mass, or by Catholic candidates for canonization, were spurious wonders foisted on an over-credulous and superstitious populace. <sup>13</sup> It was in seeking to discredit the fraudulent miracles of papists (along with those of enthusiasts, "mahometans," and heathens in general) that Protestant defenders of the rationality of Christian belief had formulated their own arguments against miracles, some of which were premised on precisely the kind of balancing of evidence which we later encounter in Hume.

As early as the mid-seventeenth century Cambridge Platonist Henry More had argued that "no miracle, though done by such as may seem of an unexceptionable Life and of more singular Sanctity, can in reason ratify any Doctrine or Practice that is repugnant to *rightly-circumscribed Sense, or Natural Truths, or Science...*" <sup>14</sup> More goes on to explain his reasoning in a remarkable anticipation of Hume's argument:

The truth of this is manifest from hence, That no man can be so certain that such a man is not a crafty and cautious Hypocrite, and his Miracle either a Juggle or Delusion of the Devil, or (if he was not an Eye-witness of it) a false report of a Miracle, as he is certain of *rightly-circumstantiated Sense, of Common Notions and Natural Science, or the Articles of the Apostolic Faith, or of any plain assertion in Scripture.* And therefore that which is most certain in this Case ought in all reason to be our Guide. <sup>15</sup>

More, like Hume, thus asks us to weigh conflicting testimonies, determine which is "most certain," and give it credence. Reports of a single miracle, he concludes, can never overturn the certainty we have of the principles of "natural science."

On the face of it More's argument seems rather reckless, as he appears to overlook the fact that "plain assertions in Scripture" may include testimonies to miraculous events, and thus scripture itself may fail the test. However, More was not wholly oblivious to the dangers of his own argument. "The true and primarie Sense of Holy Scripture," he insists, "is *Literal or Historical*, unless ... **[End Page 246]** the *Literal Meaning* be repugnant to *rightly-circumstantiated Sense or Natural Science &c.*" <sup>16</sup> What this means in effect is that in certain instances miracles reported in scripture may have to yield to some alternative scientific account. Scriptural reports of prodigies are thus notto be disbelieved, but their accompanying explanations, if couched in terms of God's immediate activity, may be treated with a degree of skepticism. Accordingly, such miraculous events as the plagues of Egypt, Noah's Flood, the parting of the Red Sea, and even the creation of the world itself might be given alternative naturalistic explanations. More's rules for sifting evidence thus give rise to a hermeneutical principle: that reports of apparent miracles in scripture be given explanations in terms of second causes where appropriate. Committed as he was to both the new science and the veracity of scripture, More believed that ultimately no conflict would arise between scripture rightly interpreted and science. <sup>17</sup>

Another reason for More's willingness to submit to established testimony had to do with his belief that empirical evidence could not but support a "spiritual" view of the world. More and Joseph Glanvill, an Oxford-educated member of the Royal Society, shared a common project which involved the accumulation of empirical evidence for the existence of witches and apparitions. In *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, Glanvill observed:

All *Histories* are full of the exploits of those *Instruments of Darkness*; and the *testimony* of all *ages*, not only of the *rude* and *barbarous*, but of the most *civiliz'd* and *Polish'd* World brings tiding of their strange performances. We have the *attestation* of thousands of Eye and Ear-witnesses, and those not of the easily deceivable vulgar only, but of wise and grave discerners. <sup>18</sup>

The balance of probabilities was again the crucial point. Glanvill points out that skeptics must believe that "all *Histories* are *Romances*; That all the *wiser* world have agreed together to *juggle* mankind into a common belief in *ungrounded fables*; That the *sound senses of multitudes* together may deceive them..." Yet if skeptics were to adopt this position, they would in fact be "more *credulous* than those whose *credulity* they reprehend." <sup>19</sup> The weight of testimony might thus [End Page 247] establish that there are uniformities in the operations of nature (as Hume was to argue); but equally such evidence might point to the existence of entities which do not seem to be subject to those laws. Glanvill's point is that the issue cannot be determined a priori, and testimony to the extraordinary cannot simply be dismissed. <sup>20</sup> Such was the commitment of More and Glanvill to a belief in the operation of incorporeal agents in the natural world that they believed that the weight of empirical evidence would favor the existence of a spiritual realm which impinged upon the material.

The best known anticipation of Hume's argument against the rationality of belief in miracles is the one to which he himself alludes in the opening lines of "Of Miracles":

There is, in Dr Tillotson's writings, an argument against the *real presence*, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine so little worthy of a serious refutation.... I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures. <sup>21</sup>

The principle which Hume discovered in Tillotson's *Discourse against Transubstantiation* was that scripture and tradition cannot outweigh the evidence of our own senses, as the former two depend on the senses of the original witnesses and thus cannot be any stronger than the immediate objects of our own senses. Moreover, we rely upon our own senses to read the words of scripture and cannot consistently argue that while they are reliable in this context, they routinely mislead us when we witness no sensible change in the elements of the mass. From this Tillotson concluded that even if the doctrine of the real presence had been delivered in scripture (a view to which in any case he did not subscribe), we would still not be justified in believing it. <sup>22</sup> Such a conclusion seems clearly to elevate the evidence of our senses over the pronouncements of scripture. [End Page 248]

The danger of the arguments of More, Glanvill, and Tillotson is obvious. Attacks mounted against Catholic miracles might be turned and applied with equal force to New Testament miracles. Indeed it was precisely this strategy which Hume adopted. The dilemma faced by Protestant controversialists was that they wished both to cast doubt upon reports of contemporary miracles (often by appealing to regularities in nature) and at the same time affirm the validity of those miracles performed by Jesus and recorded in the New Testament--miracles with an apparently more slender evidential basis than those of more recent report. The one thing which was thought to insulate the New Testament miracles from the corrosive effects of such arguments was their association with fulfilled prophecies. The accomplishment of predictions given in the New Testament could not be attributed to the fanciful imaginings of a handful of witnesses. The fulfillment of prophecy did not rely upon second-hand testimony and, as we shall see, did not necessarily entail breaches of the laws of nature. Seventeenth-century apologists could only rehearse powerful proto-Humean arguments against certain

miracles because of their confidence that the argument from prophecy was not susceptible to such arguments. Miracles performed by those who uttered such prophecies or who were the subject of such prophecies would be similarly immune. It was for this reason that from the middle of the seventeenth century the argument from prophecies increasingly takes a dominant role in rational defenses of the Christian revelation.<sup>23</sup>

## II. Prophecy and the Laws of Nature

Hume's argument against crediting testimony to a miracle rests, as pointed out earlier, on two premises--that miracles are violations of laws of nature and that our evidence for past miracles comes from the testimony of others. Up to this point we have focused our attention on the second premise, and the fact that Hume's predecessors claimed accomplished prophecies as a more secure source of evidence for Christian belief than reported miracles. Of course, evidence for historical events, including those which represent the fulfillment of some prophecy, may still depend on the testimony of witnesses. This only becomes problematic, however, if the event attested to is a violation of the laws of nature and if the number of witnesses is comparatively small. Hume's first premise, then, is worth pursuing further. In the eighteenth century were prophecies thought to entail breaches of the laws of nature, and if so, in what sense?

Hume answered this question in the affirmative, pointing out that the miraculous nature of a prophecy has to do not with the events which bring about its [End Page 249] fulfillment but with the prescience of the prophet: "if it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretell future events, it would be absurd to employ any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven."<sup>24</sup> It may well be the case, given modern assumptions which locate the human mind firmly within the sphere of material nature, that a divine communication of future events would constitute a breach of the order of nature as we now understand it. However, this is a rather anachronistic reading of the situation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at which time there was widespread agreement that the human mind was either spiritual or composed of divinely-empowered matter. Either position might call for divine activity--to empower the matter of the mind (Locke), or to coordinate the activities of the material body with those of the spiritual soul (Malebranche). Thus divine communication with the mind was not intrinsically more miraculous than the falling of an apple to the ground, for the workings of the human mind, like so many other events in nature, were a "continuous miracle." Robert Boyle observed in this connection that "the operations of the human mind, and its organical body upon one another" call for a category between natural and supernatural: "For instead of dividing the operations of God, here below, into two sorts only, natural and supernatural; I think we may take in a third sort ... which I call supra-mechanical."<sup>25</sup> One might thus deny that a particular operation was purely natural without being forced to the opposite conclusion that it must be miraculous.

Prophecy, in any case, was traditionally regarded as one of the "spiritual gifts" or "supernatural virtues." In one of his unpublished early writings Boyle thus spoke of such "Infused Vertues" as "Faith, Hope, Charity, Profesy."<sup>26</sup> Such were the gifts available in principle to all Christians as part of the divine work of sanctification--an ongoing work which, although in an obvious sense supernatural, was not classified as miraculous. Addressing this very issue, moralist and divine William Wollaston (1659-1724) was to write that the "motions and actions of men" may be influenced by God, "without any suspension or alteration of the standing laws of nature." He goes on to say that: [End Page 250]

if this then be the case, as it seems to be, that men's minds are susceptible of such *insinuations* and *impressions*, as frequently by ways unknown do affect them ... many things may be brought to pass by these means without *fixing* and *refixing* the laws of nature.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed central aspects of the devotional life of the faithful--prayer and meditation, for example--assumed a two-way communication between God and the individual which was not considered miraculous in the normal sense of the word. The related question of whether God must perform a miracle in order to grant a petition offered in prayer had long since been answered in the negative; Augustine and Aquinas had both asserted that all potential petitions

are foreseen by God and prior arrangements are made as it were to ensure their accomplishment.<sup>28</sup> The same logic could be applied in the reverse case: if an individual's communication to God of some request for a future event (which subsequently comes about) is not miraculous, then neither is God's communication to an individual of knowledge of some future event.

Another relevant consideration here is that most definitions of miracle required the event in question to be available for public scrutiny. Thus a miracle was "a sensible operation" (Locke), a work of God "appealing to the senses" (Fleetwood), "an operation visibly performed" (Chandler), and "a *sensible Effect*" (Lemoine).<sup>29</sup> Indeed the whole thrust of Tillotson's argument against transubstantiation, which Hume was to use to such potent effect, required that the supposedly miraculous events be "evident to sense." Given this requirement, the interior operations of divine grace are not miraculous, at least not in the sense that they might stand as public evidence for the truth of the Christian revelation. (Neither, incidentally, could transubstantiation be a miracle, given that it involved an insensible substantial change in the elements of bread and wine.<sup>30</sup>)

Finally, there is a sense in which the means by which a prophet acquires knowledge of the future is less relevant than the accuracy of his predictions. Hume identifies as the crucial feature of the prophet's performance the capacity to see into the future, which he then insists must be supernatural. However, one [End Page 251] might be completely agnostic about the mechanisms involved in prognostication and yet still wish to defer to the general authority of prophetic figures solely on the basis of their ability to make accurate predictions. In order to give credence to prophetic testimony one would need only to be convinced of the past reliability of specific predictions, without necessarily being committed to a particular view about what made those predictions possible. Fulfilled prophecy, then, might simply be a means by which the general trustworthiness of biblical witnesses could be established, and from that the credibility of the scriptures as a whole. As it turned out there was, for some eighteenth-century defenders of Christianity, an explanation for the prophetic powers of certain individuals which did not involve reference to the supernatural: the possibility that prophets were gifted with an exceptional knowledge of the powers of nature, a knowledge which enabled them, exclusively, to make accurate predictions.<sup>31</sup>

### III. Prophecy and Scientific Prediction

It might be argued, and indeed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was argued, that far from entailing some breach of the laws of nature, the enterprise of prophecy and its successful interpretation actually relied upon a lawful, and hence predictable, course of events in nature. Future "contingents" could be foreseen only if some lawful principle was operating in the history of the cosmos. Prophecy and scientific prediction, it might be said, would then rely equally upon a determined or mechanistic order of things.<sup>32</sup> Predictions concerning comets and eclipses, for example--the kinds of forecasts which seventeenth-century scientists became rather good at--rely upon known laws. True prophecies might also be said to rely upon "laws," the apparently miraculous nature of such performances resulting only from ignorance of the laws upon which they were based. Robert Clayton could thus define prophecy as "foretelling future Events which do not depend on a *visible* chain of necessary causes."<sup>33</sup> The difference between the laws governing the physical world and those invoked in prophecy might not constitute a real difference, but merely difference which could be attributed to [End Page 252] the limitations of human knowledge. It was with this principle in mind that William Wollaston pointed out that there is "a sagacity ... in some *men*, not only in respect of physical causes and effects, but also of the future actings of mankind." It is therefore possible in principle, he continues, "to foretell many general events, tho the intermediate transactions upon which they depend are not known."<sup>34</sup>

The plausibility of such a view was enhanced considerably by the fact that in the latter half of the seventeenth century scientific prediction had made substantial inroads on what had previously been the ambit of inspired prophecy. This blurring of the boundaries is nowhere more obvious than in the discovery of the orbits of comets.<sup>35</sup> Cambridge mathematician William Whiston attempted to demonstrate that Noah's flood had been caused by a comet

and that the final conflagration of the world would be brought about in the same manner. Had Noah had knowledge of the orbits of comets, a possibility which Whiston entertained, he could have made "prophetic" use out of this astronomical knowledge. Whiston also claimed that the Old Testament prophets Amos and Isaiah had prescience of future eclipses and earthquakes, a prescience the basis of which could only now be fully understood.<sup>36</sup> Jeremiah had likewise predicted the eclipse of the sun which would coincide with Christ's passion. This latter event, says Whiston, was at the time of its occurrence beyond natural explanation. It could not have been a solar eclipse because the crucifixion took place at the time of the full moon. Thus, to first-century observers it was a miracle, and one which could not have been foretold by natural means. Whiston claimed that this eclipse was most probably caused by a comet interposing itself between the sun and the earth. Even New Testament miracles could merely be phenomena, "which yet, til very lately, were, philosophically speaking, inexplicable."<sup>37</sup>

Whiston thus suggests that prescience of future events need not entail a breach of natural laws, and moreover that "miracles" may also fall within the ordinary operations of nature. To the first-century observer both the eclipse which took place at the time of the crucifixion and the prediction that such an eclipse would take place seem miraculous. To the scientist, however, both were amenable to naturalistic explanations. Several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scientists provided such explanations of Old Testament miracles, demonstrating that these unusual events might have taken place in accordance with the laws of **[End Page 253]** nature and that persons with an intimate knowledge of natural philosophy (as was supposed of a number of the Patriarchs and prophets) could in principle have predicted their occurrence, and at times had actually done so.<sup>38</sup> Thus, what had once been the sole purview of the prophet had become that of the scientist: the two spheres of knowledge, the prophetic and the scientific, were in principle coextensive. The confirmation of scientific hypotheses takes the same form as the confirmation of the truths of revelation through the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the most important prophecies to be fulfilled in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries concerned the signs of the approaching Eschaton. There is little doubt that Isaac Newton, Samuel Clarke, and William Whiston all came to believe that the decay and renovation of the present world system implicit in the Newtonian natural philosophy was nothing less than the destruction and restitution of the world prophesied in the apocalyptic writings of scripture.<sup>40</sup> Newton's discovery of the universal law of gravitation was itself thought to be one of the signs of the times. As Whiston noted in his memoirs, the advent of Newtonian philosophy was "an eminent prelude and preparation to those happy times of the restitution of all things, which God has spoken of...."<sup>41</sup> Whiston, moreover, unlike his more circumspect mentor, was not averse to trying his hand at more specific scientific prophecies. According to one contemporary report, on 13 October 1736 crowds gathered at the vantage point of Hampstead to view "the destruction of London" according to "the prophecy of the famous Whiston."<sup>42</sup> London's reprieve seemed not to have dampened Whiston's enthusiasm for freelance prophecy, for in 1750 we find him taking out an advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* to announce to the world that **[End Page 254]**

he expects many more Earthquakes in the World, within a year or two, at Fartherest, before the Restoration of the Jews, as Signals of its Approach, and of the horrible Miseries the wicked part of the Jews and Christians will be subject to, while the Pious and Good will be providentially preserved from them.<sup>43</sup>

Whiston, though admittedly an extreme case, clearly saw himself as a legitimate heir to the tradition of biblical prophecy, a tradition based upon an intimate knowledge of the secrets of nature.

So it was that the new science, together with breakthroughs in the "scientific" interpretation of prophecies, was invested with eschatological significance. In the last days "knowledge shall increase," said the prophet Daniel, and a no more spectacular explosion of knowledge had taken place in the course of history than the rise of modern science. In such historical events which could be directly witnessed lay the apologetic power of prophecy. If the fulfillment of

such prophecies could be observed first hand, and if their fulfillment did not entail a violation of the laws of nature, then Hume's chief argument against miracles could not apply. Isaac Newton shared with his disciples, Whiston and Clarke, a belief that everything that took place in the universe ultimately would be systematically explained. The fact that prophecy "worked" meant that there was a system to history, a system which explains why Newton expended so much energy on the interpretation of prophecy. The laws of nature and the laws of justice together served the purposes of God. The whole attitude is summed up by Whiston:

He [God] foresaw and foreadapted the intire Frame: He determin'd his Co-operation or Permission to every Action: He so order'd and appointed the whole System with every individual Branch of it, as to Time, Place, Proportion, and all other Circumstances, that nothing should happen unseasonably, unfittly, disproportionately.... <sup>44</sup>

This conception of miracle and prophecy, which accommodates both within the sphere of nature, was accepted by at least some of Hume's contemporaries. Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752), author of one of the most profound religious works of eighteenth century, *The Analogy of Religion*, unambiguously articulated this view:

It [is] supposable and credible ... that God's miraculous interpositions may have been all along ... by *general* laws of wisdom. Thus, that miraculous [End Page 255] powers should be exercised ... just at such a point all this may have been by general laws. These laws are unknown indeed to us ... (but no more unknown than the laws which govern many natural events.) <sup>45</sup>

For Butler--whose arguments formed one of Hume's chief targets--prophet and miracle-worker alike operate within the ordinary course of nature, consciously or otherwise exploiting laws which were yet to be discovered. <sup>46</sup>

The effectiveness of Hume's central argument against miracles and prophecy hinges on two fundamental assumptions: that the events in question are reported second-hand, and that they involve a violation of the laws of nature. I have suggested that there is nothing in the argument from fulfilled prophecies, as it was understood in the eighteenth century, which requires prophecies to meet these dual criteria. On the contrary, it was recognized from as early as the middle of the previous century that the argument from fulfilled prophecies did not depend upon a potentially unreliable chain of witnesses in the way that reports of New Testament miracles did. It was largely for this reason that the argument from prophecy began, from about this time, to assume the bulk of the apologetic burden it had once shared equally with miracles. For some writers it was also true that neither prophecy nor miracles disturbed the normal operations of nature, both performances relying upon newly discovered or yet to be discovered natural laws. Whether Hume himself was cognizant of the restricted application of the argument against belief in miracles we can only speculate. The fact that his broadening of the argument to encompass prophecies appears as a brief closing remark may indicate an awareness that the extension of the argument to prophecies could not withstand sustained scrutiny.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1978), X.ii.101 (130f).

<sup>2</sup>. See Antony Flew, *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford, 1986), ch. 5, "Fogelin on Hume on Miracles," *Hume Studies*, 16 (1990), 141-44; J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 1982), ch. 8; R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (London, 1981), 142-246; Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles* (London, 1989); Francis Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument against Miracles: A*

*Critical Analysis* (New York, 1989); Michael Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution* (Dordrecht, 1989); Robert J. Fogelin, "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles," *Hume Studies*, 16 (1990), 81-86; Robert Merrill, "Hume's 'Of Miracles,' Pierce, and the Balancing of Likelihoods," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 29 (1991), 85-113; Joseph Houston, *Reported Miracles* (Cambridge, 1994); Matthew Bagger, "Hume and Miracles," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 35 (1997), 237-51. One recent commentator--Chris Slupik, "A New Interpretation of Hume's 'Of Miracles,'" *Religious Studies*, 31 (1995), 517-36--has suggested that Hume did not necessarily consider miracles to be breaches of natural law, but this view is not shared by most of Hume's interpreters.

[3.](#) Boyle, *The Christian Virtuoso*, in *The Works*, ed. Thomas Birch (6 vols.; Hildesheim, 1966), V, 535f.

[4.](#) Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1674), 715.

[5.](#) Robert Clayton, *A Dissertation on Prophecy* (London, 1749), 111.

[6.](#) Clarke, Sermon CXXVIII, *Works* (4 vols.; New York, 1978), II, 79f (my emphasis). In another work, Clarke remarked: "The Miracles (I say) which our Saviour worked, were, to the Disciples that saw them, sensible Demonstrations of his Divine Commission." *Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion*, *Works*, II, 702 (Clarke's emphasis).

[7.](#) According to Anthony Collins, "Prophecy is a stronger Argument than a Miracle, which depends on external Evidence and Testimony." *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London, 1724), 27. See also Conyers Middleton, *An Examination of the Bishop of London's Discourses concerning Prophecy* (London, 1750), 54, 75. Even such a critic of miracles as Spinoza argued that miracles and prophecy required separate treatment. *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VI, *Works* (2 vols.; London, 1889), I, 96. Some divines had inferred from the text of II Peter 1.19--"We have also a more sure word of prophecy"--that prophecy was a superior evidence even to the witness of the apostles. Thus, Thomas Sherlock: "the Words of the Text according to their most natural Sense, do import that the Evidence of Prophecy, is a surer Evidence than that before mentioned; which was the Apostle's own Testimony of the Glory of Christ, which he had seen with his Eyes." *The Use and Intent of Prophecy in Six Discourses* (London, 1725), 14f. Sherlock himself wished to resist this interpretation, while acknowledging it to be a common one.

[8.](#) Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, 700.

[9.](#) E.g., Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, II.vi.1; Boyle, *The Christian Virtuoso*, *Works*, V, 514; Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae* (Cambridge, 17027), II.vi (116); William Fleetwood, *An Essay upon Miracles in Two Discourses* (London, 1701), 13f; Bentley, *Works*, ed. A. Dyce (3 vols.; London, 18386), III, 125. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2a.2ae. 6, 1.

[10.](#) A. A. Sykes, *A Brief Discourse concerning the Credibility of Miracles and Revelation* (London, 1742), 43f; Cf. Abraham Lemoine, *A Treatise on Miracles* (London, 1747), 359, 365. On the acknowledged limitations of the argument from miracles, and of linking of the arguments from miracles and prophecy, see Burns, *The Great Debate*, 109-11, and passim.

[11.](#) Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill (6 vols.; Oxford, 1934-50), III, 188. See Donald Siebert, Jr., "Johnson and Hume on Miracles," *JHI*, 36 (1975), 543-47; James Force, "Hume and Johnson on Prophecy and Miracles: Historical Context," *JHI*, 43 (1982), 463-75. Force takes this episode as indicative of the fact that Johnson was not familiar with Hume's argument in detail and was thus unaware of Hume's extension of the argument to prophecies; but it better sustains the interpretation that Johnson, like others, believed that Hume's argument could not apply to prophecies. Johnson, incidentally, had quite a sophisticated view of miracles. See his *The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist ... with ... a treatise ... entitled, A Short and Safe Rule, whereby to distinguish between false miracles and true* (London, 1741).

[12.](#) As Steven Shapin has convincingly argued in *The Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994), esp. 211-42. See also Peter Dear, "Miracles, Experiments, and the Ordinary Course of Nature," *Isis*, 81 (1990), 663-83.

[13.](#) Robert Boyle (*The Christian Virtuoso, Works*, V, 531, 538) linked the scientific and religious by arguing that the generic skill of judging the reliability of evidence could be used with great effect in matters of both religion and science.

[14.](#) Henry More, *A Brief Discourse of the True Grounds of the Certainty of Faith in Points of Religion*, in *Theological Works* (London, 1708), 769. Thomas Sherlock considers a related argument in *The Tryal of the Witnesses* (London, 1743), 58. Cf. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, ch. 15; Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, ch. xv, 458; Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, X.i.89 (113-14).

[15.](#) More, *A Brief Discourse*, 769.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, 768.

[17.](#) Subsequent generations of students at Cambridge had learned More's lessons well. See Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London, 1681), III.viii, (283); William Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth* (London, 1696), 95.

[18.](#) Joseph Glanvill, *Sadducismus Triumphatus: or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (London, 1683), 67. Cudworth (*True Intellectual System*, 700) put forward a similar argument with respect to miracles: "But to deny and disbelieve all Miracles, is either to deny all Certainty of Sense, which would indeed make it self *Miraculous*; or else monstrously and unreasonably to derogate from *Humane Testimonies* and *History*."

[19.](#) *Ibid.*, 68.

[20.](#) Glanvill gives a brief discussion of miracles in *ibid.*, 124-26.

[21.](#) Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, X.i.86 (109f).

[22.](#) Samuel Johnson (*Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, 22) gives a similar argument. See Geoffrey Scarre, "Tillotson and Hume on Miracles," *The Downside Review*, 110 (1992), 45-65; Michael Levine, "Belief in Miracles: Tillotson's Argument Against Transubstantiation as a Model for Hume," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 23 (1988), 125-60; Dennis Ahern, "Hume on the Evidential Impossibility of Miracles," in *Studies in Epistemology*, ed. N. Rescher (Oxford, 1975), 14-30. M. A. Stewart ("Hume's Historical View of Miracles," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright [University Park, Penn., 1995], 184) has recently put a good case to the effect that the specific argument of Tillotson's to which Hume refers is actually in a piece entitled "The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome."

[23.](#) See James Force, "Hume and the Relation of Science to Religion among Certain Members of the Royal Society," *JHI*, 45 (1985), 525f.

[24.](#) Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, X.i.101(131). Cf. James Force, "The Breakdown of the Newtonian Synthesis," 154; Richard Popkin, "Predicting, Prophesying, Divining and Foretelling from Nostradamus to Hume," in R. Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden, 1992), 285-307 (esp. 303f).

[25.](#) Boyle, *The Christian Virtuoso, Works*, VI, 754; Cf. *Considerations about the Reconcilableness of Reason and Religion, Works*, IV, 180.

[26](#). Boyle, *Aretology* II.4, in John T. Harwood (ed.), *The Early Essays and Ethics of Robert Boyle* (Carbondale, 1991), 92. Boyle thus follows St. Paul's classification of "gifts of the spirit" (I Corinthians 12), and Aquinas's distinction between "gifts" and the "natural and supernatural virtues," *Summa theologiae* 2a.2ae 9. Elsewhere, however, Boyle states that prophecies are "supernatural things" concluding that they must therefore be classified with miracles. *The Christian Virtuoso, Works*, V, 535. The ability to prophesy, however, better fits his later category, "supra-mechanical."

[27](#). Wollaston, *Religion of Nature Delineated*, 106, 107. Wollaston's moral philosophy, a further development of the moral thought of Samuel Clarke, was one of the main targets of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*.

[28](#). Augustine, *De civitate dei*, V.9,10; Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 95; and see Whiston, *A Vindication of the New Theory of the Earth* (London, 1698), 30f.; Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 104.

[29](#). Locke, *Discourse of Miracles*, in *Works* (10 vols.; London, 180110) IX, 256; Fleetwood, *Essay upon Miracles*, 139; Samuel Chandler, *A Vindication of the Christian Religion* (London, 1725), 16; Lemoine, *A Treatise on Miracles*, 2.

[30](#). Tillotson, *Discourse Against Transubstantiation*, in *Works*, ed. T. Birch (10 vols.; London, 1820), II, 407-52. Cf. Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford, 1954), 278.

[31](#). Many apologists nonetheless endorsed the position expressed by Hume, that prophetic abilities exceed natural human capacities. Thus Stillingfleet: "the events that are foretold, must be such as do exceed the reach of any created Intellect; for otherwise it cou'd be no evidence of a Spirit of true Prophecy," *Origines Sacrae*, II.vi (119). The anonymous writer of *A Short Discourse concerning Miracles* (London, 1702), also referred to "miracles wrought within us" which included "*Inspiration, Divine Dreams, and Visions*" (19).

[32](#). The practice of astrology was defended on these grounds; see Popkin, "Predicting, Prophesying, Divining and Foretelling from Nostradamus to Hume," 289.

[33](#). Robert Clayton, *Dissertation on Prophecy*, 29 (my emphasis). Cf. Wollaston: "we cannot tell *how* future things are known perhaps, any more than deaf or blind people what sounds or colours are, and *how* they are perceived; but yet there may be a way of knowing *those*, as well as perceiving *these*." *Religion of Nature Delineated*, 101f.

[34](#). Wollaston, *Religion of Nature Delineated*, 100. It is also worth pointing out that the accurate prediction of future events does not require knowledge of the causal mechanisms involved. The ancient Babylonians could predict eclipses with remarkable accuracy from astronomical tables, but had not the vaguest notion of how such eclipses came about.

[35](#). See Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge, 1982), 38-43.

[36](#). Whiston, *Six Dissertations* (London, 1734), 184.

[37](#). Whiston, *The Testimony of Phlegon Vindicated* (London, 1732), 38.

[38](#). See, e.g., Thomas Burnet, *The Theory of the Earth* (London, 1691), 381 and passim; Nehemiah Grew, *Cosmologia Sacra* (London, 1701), 196f; William Whiston, *New Theory of the Earth*, 218f; and see Peter Harrison, "Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature," *JHI*, 56 (1995), 531-53.

[39](#). James Force ("Hume and Johnson," 469f ) thus argues that "For Whiston, as well as for some of his philosophic contemporaries, prophecies are predictions which may be verified to a degree of probability ("moral certainty") by examining the testimony of the most ancient historical sources. Such a procedure is analogous to a scientific experiment because ultimately these testimonies are based on the sense experience, memory, and documents of the reporters."

[40](#). See David Kubrin, "Newton and the Cyclical Cosmos," *JHI*, 28 (1967), 325-46.

[41](#). Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Whiston* (London, 1753), I, 34. Newton also believed that his discovery of the meaning of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation was an important part of the increase of knowledge which was to precede the millennium: Yahuda MS I.i, fol. 1r, reproduced in Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford, 1974), 107-25.

[42](#). Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary popular Delusions* (London, 1841), 170, quoted in Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Princeton, 1989), 146.

[43](#). *Daily Observer*, 14 March 1750.

[44](#). Whiston, *New Theory*, 119.

[45](#). *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, in *Works*, ed. W. Gladstone (2 vols.; Oxford, 1896), I, 247f.

[46](#). On Hume and Butler, see Terrence Penelhum, *Butler* (London, 1985), 172.