

## *The Evidence of Prophecy and Miracle*

**Bernard Ramm**

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An unbroken belief stretches from earliest Hebrew times to the present century that supernatural knowledge in the form of a fulfilled prophetic utterance, and supernatural power in the form of a miracle are indicia of a divinely given revelation. The Biblical appeal to this type of evidence is clear; the Church Fathers wrote extensively on the subject; and the witness of the fulfilled prophetic word and the accomplished miracle has been central in Christian apologetics in the subsequent Catholic and Protestant centuries. Few convictions in Christendom have such a sustained historical continuity.

However, the appeal to Christian evidences has been seriously questioned in modern times.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers have construed systems which have *ex hypothesi* excluded any supernatural events. Philosophers have also questioned the sufficiency of the grounds of Christian evidences, or the validity of the argument from evidences. Scientists are of the opinion that the supernaturalism of Christian evidences is incompatible with the naturalism of the scientific method. Religious liberals, having agreed with the scientists, added a religious objection: in that God assertedly always works from within nature, he never works on nature from the outside, i.e., supernaturally. Finally, theo-

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logians under the influence of Kierkegaard have urged that any obvious supernatural act of God would be destructive for faith, or inconsequential to it.

The result is that within and without the Church the traditional apology of the witness of prophecy and miracle receives scant attention. But if the historical revelation of God be accepted, how is the argument from prophecy and miracle to be assessed? Should this part of our apologetic be judged as outmoded? Or is the witness of the Christian centuries to the validity of this appeal to be maintained?

### **I. BIBLICAL MATERIALS**

Whatever may be the doubts of modern theologians about Christian evidences, the Biblical witness is clear: *the fulfilled prophetic utterance and the accomplished miracle are the indicia of a supernatural revelation and redemption wrought by a Divine Person who is making himself known by these means.*

We are not speaking of a passage of one of the prophets which appears to have been fulfilled in some historical event. Much rather, we are appealing to the texts *which state the very*

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<sup>1</sup> Christian evidences has a wider scope than fulfilled prophecy and miracles, but for the purposes of this essay we are restricting our discussion to these items. "Evidences" is not the best word; "indicia," or "witnesses," or "signs" is more Biblical, and apologetically, less ambiguous.

*structure of Christian evidences itself*. It is the Scripture itself which sets up the structure of Christian evidences, and not, to the contrary, the work of apologists who have imposed a structure upon Scripture. For example, in the discussion of the Great Prophet who shall come (Deut. 18) the difficulty created by the appearance of the false prophets is discussed. The Israelite must be able to distinguish the true prophet from the false. The text reads: "And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him." (vv. 21-22) The corollary *necessarily* follows: if the thing does come to pass, the prophet speaks from God. The fulfilled prophetic utterance points out the true prophet of God.

The subject matter of Isaiah 41 is God's contention with pagan gods. The Israelite not only had the problem of differentiating the true from the false prophet, but the true God from the gods of the surrounding nations. The word of Scripture again gives us the structure of the apologetic: If a god does not know the future, he is a dead god; if he knows the future, he is the living God. God through Isaiah thus taunts the idols: "Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods" (v. 23, italics supplied).<sup>2</sup>

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The extent of the fulfilled prophetic word in Scripture is not within our province, but the materials are rather large. They stretch from Genesis 3:15 through the prophetic utterances of our Lord concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, and they proffer a rather indigestible surd to those theologians who have no place for the supernatural in their systems.

Not only is the structure of the appeal to the fulfilled prophetic word given within Scripture, but also the appeal to the manifestation of the divine power in miracles. For example, when Moses asks God how he (Moses) shall make it clear to the Israelites that he speaks from God and not from himself, he is assured of such miraculous signs as will remove doubt (Exod. 4:1 ff.). And what is true of Moses is true of many other prophets who were granted miraculous powers that it might be clear to Israel that they were God's spokesmen. Here again the structure of the apologetic is not foisted upon Scripture but found native to Scripture.

Our Lord himself claimed that his works witnessed to his divine origin and to the divinity of his teaching. His words in this connection are difficult to controvert. For example, he claimed that the power to heal implied the power to forgive sin, and the power to forgive sin implied the power to heal (Matt. 9:1-8). Cities in which he performed supernatural works were not complimented for failing to respond to a defective apologetic but were upbraided for rejecting the witness of the miracles (Matt. 11:20 ff.). When the disciples of John the Baptist came asking for clear evidence of his Messiah-ship, he satisfied them by pointing to his various miraculous acts (Lk. 7:19-23).

Our Lord, on one occasion, informed his listeners that if they could not accept his naked word, they should be properly impressed by his miracles, and so believe (John 10:38).

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<sup>2</sup> This structure is elaborated in Ezekiel. More than fifty times Ezekiel states that through some God-given *indicium*, Israel would know that her God is the living God.

With regard to the miraculous signs given to the apostles, the witness of Hebrews 2:4 is unusually clear: "God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will" (The Greek text is especially emphatic: *sunepimartyrountos tou theou*—"God bearing a witness along with theirs and in addition to it"). And Paul affirms that the resurrection of Christ very strongly (*en dynamei*—"powerfully") marks (*horisthentos*) him out as the Son of God (Rom. 1:4).

The number of miracles recorded in Scripture is large, to be sure. But certain matters are apparent: (1) when the total time span of the Biblical record is considered, the number of miracles is few; (2) they tend to cluster around certain great events or persons; and (3) the maximum saturation is to be found in the life of Christ as we would expect it to be, for he supplies the climax of revelation and redemption.

If we are committed to a revelation of God in history, we are committed also to the mode in which God *professes* to seal his revelation. A theology which professes to accept this revelation, and yet rejects the structure of the

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witness of the revelation itself to its divinity, comes short of complete loyalty to the truth of God. For the structure of the apologetic from evidences is contained within Scripture itself.

## II. THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

For a theologian committed to the Biblical revelation, the real problem is not whether this apologetic structure exists, but rather, to determine its place in a wider apologetic. While theologians have agreed that the Scriptures do contain the fulfilled prophetic word and the accomplished divine miracle, they disagree over the role such evidences are to play in a Christian apologetic.

The issue can be crystallized by presenting a painfully simple contrast of the extremes in this matter: (1) Some theologians are convinced that Christian evidences must play a minor role in Christian apologetics. This has been urged on two different grounds. One group argues that a man believes the gospel simply because the Holy Spirit enables him to believe. Christian evidences can make no appeal prior to the Spirit's work, and the work of the Spirit is so convincing that any appeal to evidences after the Spirit's work is relatively unimportant. Another group of theologians thinks that the case for Christianity is to be made by an adequate philosophical apologetic. Unless a man accepts the total structure of Christian thought through philosophical apologetics, he will not hear the witness of Christian evidences; but if he is persuaded that Christianity is true on philosophical grounds then Christian evidences will add little to his convictions.

However, (2) other theologians are convinced that Christian evidences present an indubitable authentication of a divine revelation independent of philosophical considerations. They are an appeal to the average man (not the sophisticated man), and as such are conclusive. If the evidences are rejected, the rejection is not due to any ambiguous element in the evidences, nor to lack of cogency of the argument, but solely to the obstinacy of the sinful mind.

We shall not attempt at this point a reconciliation of these two points of view, each of which has a large and necessary fragment of the truth.

### III. THE INNER AND OUTER WITNESS

The root of the issue in Christian evidences is the character of Christian apologetics, and the doctrine of spiritual or religious certitude which must accompany it. If the major outline of Christian apologetics can be traced, then the narrower province of Christian evidences can be ascertained. For a historical point of departure we turn to the thought of Augustine.

Augustine taught that truth of every kind is grounded in *The Truth*, God himself. Any truth which man learns constitutes a species of revelation.

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This revelation is two-pronged: there is the impartation of truth, and a capacity granted to receive it. Wherever men possess truth they possess it in virtue of the fact that God has supplied it and granted the illumination necessary for its apprehension.

This same pattern of revelation is true of the Christian faith but with necessary religious modification. God has imparted a revelation of himself to man, and this revelation is the truth. Man, blinded by sin, needs a special illumination in his heart enabling him to grasp the truth of God as truth. With every fruitful grasping of the truth of the gospel must be an inner illumination of the mind showing that the gospel is the truth. Thus the Christian's acquisition of truth, and his religious certitude about the truth derive directly from God.

While wrestling with the problem of religious authority John Calvin developed Augustine's insights Biblically rather than philosophically and produced for the Christian Church his great doctrine of *the inner witness of the Holy Spirit*. The sense of divine truth, and the religious certitude over divine truth which the Christian possesses, stem from the inner operation of the Holy Spirit upon the human heart (Gal. 4:6), or the human spirit (Rom. 8:16), or the human understanding (I John 5:19). Christian certitude is a creation of the Holy Spirit within the human heart by the instrument of the preached or read Word of God. This certitude is not man-made by human reason, nor created by the teaching of an infallible institution (the Roman Catholic Church), nor the product of a remarkable religious experience (as in religious fanaticism), but it is *God-made* through the Word and the Spirit.

If these premises are true, it means that there is no genuine religious life in the heart till the heart is stirred by the Holy Spirit. Neither the Church, nor human reason, nor religious experience can accomplish the work of the Spirit and the Word. Once the Spirit moves in the Word, there shine into the Christian heart *light, truth, and certitude*.

These conclusions may now be directly applied to our understanding of Christian evidences. Only the Spirit and the Word may break through the human shell of sin and unbelief.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the witness of miracle and prophecy apart from the Spirit's action falls upon deaf

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Feine has noted that this is the doctrine of the entire Scripture. Cf. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (achte Auflage; Berlin: Evangelische Verlaganstalt, 1949), p. 263. We have developed these theses at greater length in our own work, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

ears and dead hearts. In themselves alone evidences cannot move the heart to faith. It is improper to expect evidences to slay unbelief, to rout atheism, and to convert sinners. Saving faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and this is requisite for all acts of faith.

These theses are illustrated in the story told about Lazarus and Dives. Dives, in torment, asks that a messenger be sent by Abraham to his brothers

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to warn them of the coming torment. Abraham replies that the brothers of Dives possess the truth of God in the writings of Moses and the prophets. But, Dives remonstrates, his brothers need something *extra* to rouse them out of their sinful ways: *let one from the dead evangelize them!* Abraham replies: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31). The truth is obvious: if these brothers would not hear the voice of the Spirit in the Scriptures, they would not respond to a remarkable example of evidences.

It is the Spirit working in the Word which arouses man to spiritual life and faith, and no appeal in isolation from the Spirit and the Word "gets through," so to speak.

However, great care must be exercised at this point. It might be deduced from what has been just said that Christian evidences are superfluous. It could be said: they are ineffectual *before* faith, and inconsequential *after* faith. The temptation—and it is a great one—is to rest the Christian apologetic completely upon the inner witness of the Spirit.

However, we do not believe that such a claim has fully pounded out the issues. The Christian faith is the truth of God and it exists prior to any man's experience of it, or personal certitude of it through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in the Word, and the Word of revelation exists as a reality separate from its realization in the hearts of men by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not create truth in his inner witness; he creates an *ability* within the blind man to see the truth, and the life within a dead man to apprehend it, and a *conviction* within a heretofore faithless mind that it is the truth. This is an inner, spiritual religious certitude.

But another question must be asked: *what are the indicia of divinity in the Christian religion itself?* What is the mark of divinity in the Truth to which the Spirit bears a divine witness? The meaning of Christian evidences is this: *there is a congruity between the divine witness in the heart and the Christian religion*. Just as the Spirit puts a stamp of divinity in the believer's consciousness, so God has put a stamp of divinity upon the Christian religion. An apologetic which treats evidences lightly—a mere tipping of the hat in passing—is therefore a curtailed apologetic.

It must be emphasized strongly that the prophetic word and the accomplished miracle are part of the Word of God in which the Spirit witnesses. The Spirit of God may, therefore, witness to the gospel in those passages that are prophetic or that contain an account of a miracle. The Spirit in using these passages containing "evidences" is employing part of sacred Scripture. On the other hand, when the Spirit bears his witness in other parts of Scripture, and the Christian perceives the divinity in those Scriptures, he is thus prepared to perceive the divinity of Scripture in those Scriptures which deal with "evidences." This is no luxury added to the

witness of the Spirit but is a necessity for the heart's full rest in the certainties of the Christian religion. It is the nail at the *other* end of the board which certifies to the Christian

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that he is neither the victim of some inward psychological phenomenon, nor of some outward socio-religious pressure. Therefore the inward witness of the Spirit and the divine indicia of the evidences must be properly related for a complete sense of Christian certitude.

This congruity is to be stressed in another direction. *The Christian has had a taste of the power indicated by the evidences*. The power which raised Christ from the dead is the same power quickening the believer from spiritual death to spiritual life (Eph. 2:1 ff.). The power that dispelled the gloom of cosmic darkness dispels the sinful darkness of the human heart (II Cor. 4:1 ff.). The power which took away the blindness of a Bartimaeus takes away the blindness of human sin in the believer's mind. The omniscience of God in prophecy is tasted by the Christian when he must confess that he did not know God, but God knew him. The Christian is partaker of the powers that have been—in the mighty acts of God, in the past—and of the age that shall be.

The conclusions reached at this point of our discussion are: (1) the priority of the work of the Spirit excludes the adequacy of a purely "intellectual" faith stimulated by Christian evidences in isolation; and (2) that the reality of the fulfilled prophetic word and the accomplished miracle assures the Christian that the other end of the board, so to speak, is firmly nailed down.

A question left over is the query whether Christian evidences should be preached or not. To be sure, the gospel is the center of Christian preaching, but the minister is called to preach the total witness of God—the whole counsel of God. As stated previously, evidences are part of the Word of God. The Spirit may indeed use this aspect to bring illumination into the heart. The mistake of previous generations was not that it preached Christian evidences, but that it tacitly assumed that the evidences in and by themselves could do the work of the Holy Spirit. The point has been made that they cannot; but this does not mean that they have become useless. If evidences are preached as part of the Word of God with the full understanding of the priority of the witness of the Spirit, then evidences may be part of our preaching materials. That sinners have been saved by the preaching of evidences—and by the reading of works on evidences—is a matter of record.

#### IV. THE NATURE OF THE WITNESS

Having said this much it is now necessary to examine in greater detail the structure of the witness of Christian evidences. Prophecy and miracle take place in a world of sinful men, and in conjunction with a divine redemption and a divine revelation. It is in this context that the witness of the evidences occurs and if examined apart from this context the witness loses its meaning. According to Scripture, sin has effected a serious and wicked condition in the human heart. The possible manifestations of sin are countless, and each

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century has written its own record of its peculiar infamy. If God is the beatitude of man, then man's spiritual separation from God will inevitably result in man's self-corruption in sin. The most tragic manifestation of sin is the disappearance from the consciousness of man of *a knowledge of God*; and the most singular evidence of this tragic loss is the corrupt form of religious worship, or the very absence of worship.

Sinful man may turn art into smut, love into sensuality, and power into tyranny. He will use knowledge for his devilry, and science for his cruelty. He is capable of corrupting to some degree every human faculty, every human institution, and every human relationship. Unless we take into assessment the complete dimensions of sin we cannot comprehend the Christian teaching of revelation, redemption, and Christian evidences. The divine remedy must be more than equal to the human perfidy, and wherever Christian evidences are underestimated or denied we must urge that in some manner or other the situation created by man's sinfulness has not been properly assessed. If the assessment is proper it will reveal how and why the prophetic word and the powerful miracle are a necessary and vital part of the overcoming of human sin.

For example, religious liberalism had little taste for Christian evidences, branding miracles not merely as impossibilities but as real hindrances to faith. But the religious liberal had so *redefined* sin that any sort of supernatural aid to sinful man appeared out of place. That religious liberalism had failed to plumb the radical depths of sin is acknowledged in much contemporary theological literature, and it is now judged that the older orthodoxy had a better estimate of human sin than religious liberalism did. But if man is radically sinful (in the original meaning of radical—pertaining to the roots) then the doctrine of redemption proposed by religious liberalism is too weak to cope with the sinful human predicament. On the other hand, if an orthodox theologian treats evidences cursorily it means that he has not realized all the measures the redeeming God must take to reach human consciousness.

Christian evidences—the supernatural word and the supernatural act—is part of the means whereby the loving and redeeming God reaches through to fallen and sinful consciousness with his saving truth. This *supernaturalism* is one piece with the supernaturalism of the creative word, and the powers of the age to come.

Commensurate with the doctrine of sin are the doctrines of revelation and redemption. The former concerns itself with the restoration to man of a true knowledge of God, and the latter with the restoration of man to a living fellowship with God. Each implicates the other. Thus the prophetic word and the miracle are *participants in revelation and redemption*. And it is not surprising that in the supreme Person of revelation, who is at the same time the climax of redemption—the Saviour—should be found the greatest concentration of supernatural phenomena in the entirety of sacred history.

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Therefore these supernatural phenomena are not isolated events to be judged in themselves, but are parts of the whole fabric of divine revelation and divine salvation. A theologian is not true to the Biblical witness if he denies them, or ignores them, or neglects them.

One of the reasons why Christian evidences is the theological orphan of the twentieth century is that the nature of the various evidences as witnesses has not always been clearly stated. Let

us now inspect the nature of this witness commencing with miracles. No matter where man has lived he has become directly acquainted with his own powers and those of his environment. He learns how much he can lift, how long he can work, and how far he can run. He has some sense of the strength of the wind, the bite of the frost, the heat of the sun's rays, the force of a flood, and the violence of a lightning bolt. His life is a constant pitting of his powers against those of his environment. The psychological intensity of this struggle is greatest at times of sickness and death. In his experiences with power—his own and that of nature—he develops an alphabet (or calculus) of power.

This alphabet is never the same with all peoples, and may change much within the historical existence of a particular people. But man is aware when something transcends his alphabet of power. Something which suddenly stands outside this alphabet speaks to him of a power greater than what he has heretofore experienced, and usually points man to an Omnipotent Spirit.

Christian evidences deals with the action of God in transcending the alphabets of power of the various cultures and periods into which his revelation came. When God so transcends an alphabet of power, he has prepared the situation. God has controlled the alphabet of power of the people to whom he shall speak; he has chosen, furthermore, to act supernaturally in connection with his plans of revelation and redemption. So the supernatural act is not to be compared to an airplane dropping down upon some primitive tribe and eliciting worship from the primitives. The opening of the Red Sea, for example, did not come from nowhere, so to speak. It was part of an entire nexus of redemption and revelation commencing remotely with the promises made to Abraham, and immediately with the ministry of Moses. The plans laid for the revelation to be given, and the salvation to be accomplished, included the supernatural means and the alphabet of power of the Egyptians and Israelites.

The same may be said for the life of Christ. The revelation in his life and word, the salvation wrought in his death and resurrection, and the *alphabet of power* of the people of that time are of one piece in the counsels of God.

By his display of power in transcending the alphabets of power at various times and places, God has put his stamp upon the revelation and redemption with which the display of power is intimately and necessarily associated. A miracle is a manifestation of the *omnipotence* of God. It *impresses* man because it transcends his alphabet of power. It is part of the divine program

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necessary for the reclamation of man. It is a powerful and dramatic means of bearing witness to a consciousness weakened and clouded by sin.

Man has similarly developed an alphabet of knowledge, and much of what we have said of the alphabet of power pertains to the alphabet of knowledge. Psychologically speaking, man feels his limitations of knowledge greatest when he faces decisions which seem to require detailed knowledge of the future. If an alphabet of power be transcended, it will be most singularly transcended in the area of future events *which do not exist as yet*. A transcending of an



alphabet of knowledge points to an Omniscient Spirit. The fulfilled prophetic word is the witness of the action of the Living God.<sup>4</sup>

*The Biblical notion is clear with reference to the fulfilled prophetic word: The God of Israel is the Living God because he knows what shall be, and this omniscience differentiates the God of Israel from false gods, and the prophet of Israel from false prophets; and the religion of Israel from false religions.*

## V. DOES IT MAKE ITS CASE?

Some generous soul might grant that the structure here presented is valid as a structure, but would doubt if there is a reality to which the structure conforms. Does Christian evidences make its case? Perhaps the exegesis behind the fulfilled prophetic word is wrong, or the document which contains the prophecy was written centuries after the events described. And might not the history of the documents which report miracles be suspect? And are there not several other possible explanations of miracles besides referring them to God?

Since we have elsewhere treated these problems extensively, in our work *Protestant Christian Evidences*, we shall not repeat the materials here. In the previous part of this essay we noted that we do not expect evidences to make their case apart from the Holy Spirit. But the authenticity of evidences as witnesses to revelation may be suggested by the following considerations:

(1) In its doctrine of God as Creator the Christian faith has the necessary prerequisite of the occurrence of supernatural events in this world. He who is Creator possesses the wisdom and the power to so act.

(2) The Christian faith also has the necessary justification for such supernatural acts in its doctrines of sin, revelation, and redemption. Human sin, divine redemption, and supernatural act are of one piece, and their impressiveness is seen in their interrelationship. The divine revelation and redemption illuminate the mind with reference to the meaning of the supernatural act. Biblical miracles are not historical oddities nor indigestible entities nor mythological tales; they are "lighted" from within by the meaning derived

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from the doctrines of revelation and redemption. (Werner Elert has brilliantly pointed out that our entire notion of historical possibility or impossibility is profoundly associated with the character of our inner life. A Christian has no problem with the historical possibility of the resurrection of Christ because in the call of the gospel he has met the Risen Lord. A person who has not heard this gospel call does not have the inner possibility to judge the possibility or impossibility of this event. Cf. *Der Christliche Glaube*, pp. 159 ff.)

On the other hand, the supernatural act is an arrow, a witness, a signal which arrests our minds and stirs our hearts from their spiritual stupor. It is a necessary and dramatic means of

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<sup>4</sup> We are not in a position here to give a lengthy discussion of the entire character of the prophetic word. Our only purpose has been to present in simplest details the witness-bearing character of a fulfilled divine utterance. Nor do we have space to comment on the abuses of this witness in previous centuries.

Bernard Ramm, "The Evidence of Prophecy and Miracle," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.253-263.

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calling attention to the redemptive drama, and without this dramatic witness we might let the redemptive drama go unnoticed. And while calling such dramatic attention to such an occurring redemption it also indicates its divine character.

(3) By careful exegesis of the Scripture text the divine fulfillment of the divine promise may be shown. Not even the radical redating of the Old Testament books destroys the force of the argument since numerous prophecies fall on the other side of these critical dates. By a study of the text and their contents the weight of evidence can be shown to lean towards the historicity of the miracles of Jesus Christ, and particularly to his resurrection. The life and writings of Paul are decisive at this point. Most critics accept the basic Pauline writings as authentic, and they give us an early and reliable witness to the resurrection.

The fulfilled promise of a prophetic word, the miraculous act of an apostle, are part of the divine indicia which inform the believing heart that the religion he holds within his heart by reason of the witness of the Spirit in the Word exists also in the world (prior to his personal experience) by the supernatural acts of the Living God.

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