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### From What We Know to Faith: The Possibility of Revelation

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# 11

## From What We Know to Faith: The Possibility of Revelation

*Review of previous chapters.* We have now before us in outline the general ground plan of what we know. First, that which we may say we know definitely, from contact with it in our experiences in one form or another; and second, what we may be said to know only up to the point of moral certainty, obtained by reasoning from what we know to that which may be possible; thence, to that which may be probable; thence, to that which is of moral certainty, for the reason that it must be reality because of its conformity to reason, and because the contrary is inconceivable.

This ~~review~~ has led us to the consideration of things that deal with self-consciousness and other consciousness; to things cognized through the senses, knowledge of things of life and of the earth; and then to knowledge of things external to the earth, things of the solar system; thence to such knowledge of things as we have out in the space depths of the sidereal system; its immensity, the almost inconceivable distances that separate the suns and the probability of their inhabitan-  
tancy, by sentient intelligences.

*What is the meaning of the universe?* And now the question: Is what we know to be true of this vast field we have contemplated entirely satisfactory? What does it all teach us in relation to the important, fundamental things that man ought to know? What is the significance and meaning of constantly changing forms of, and in matter, and yet the conservation of its mass? Is there some mighty purpose under all this great universe we have contemplated, or is it without purpose? Is there in existence some “far off event” to which all the world systems

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[Chapters 11-15 are essentially paraphrased summaries of material in Roberts's *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1907-11), which consists primarily of quotations from other works.]

are moving? ***What mean all the activities within this universe?*** Is there some stupendous plan being worked out worthy and commensurate with all this immensity of space and time and substance, and force? What is the mystery of man's life and death—of all life and death? And whither are all things tending? Is man's life through a union of spirit and body by some process or other to be made immortal? Or is the union of body and spirit to be permanently broken by death? If such is to be his end—the spirit and body eternally separated, the body resolved to dust, the spirit to oblivion or at least to an unknown end, then what was the purpose of man coming into existence as spirit and body united? In all that we have contemplated in our review of what man knows, we have found nothing that brings a solution to these inquiries; and yet without this knowledge life is a riddle that man knows not what to make of. To what source shall he turn for this necessary knowledge that will solve these vital, human problems?

*Testimony of the works of nature inadequate.* The universe itself conveys no information on these matters. "Turn not to that inverted bowl men call the sky,"<sup>a</sup> for answer to these questions; for the worlds of the universe are impotent to answer. I know how forceful in testimony the heavens and the glory of them can be in supplementing a certain positive message, did we but possess such a message. The heavens and the glory of them, however, are and can be only auxiliary witnesses to the principle message that shall impart the knowledge we seek. Until that knowledge comes, however, appeal to the creation is vain in hope of finding anything conclusive upon the questions that are here presented. The Psalmist may say, as he beautifully does say:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 19:1-4)

But what do the heavens and the glory of them say upon the questions already submitted to the reader in this chapter?

We are mindful also of what Paul says, "The invisible things of him (i.e., of God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20). But what do "the things that are made" say of God's "eternal power and Godhead?" What do they say upon the important questions submitted to the reader in this chapter?

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<sup>a</sup>Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyat of Omar Kháyyám*, 52. Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam was widely read around the turn of the century.

If men of such classic mold as David and Paul fail to bring definite answers from the heavens and the glory of them upon the questions herein submitted, then it is vain to hope that men of lesser mold would be successful in a like attempt. Not that such have not tried, however; they have tried, but unfortunately they sought to make definite statement of what the message from the “structure of the universe” conveyed, which only resulted in showing how weak and inadequate the message was conceived to be. In illustration I quote from one of the best attempts in this kind, and the author of which is the best known of deists and credited with possession of the keenest mind, and was of unusual literary ability:

“The wonderful structure of the Universe,” said Thomas Paine,<sup>b</sup>

and everything that we behold in the system of the creation prove to us, far better than books can do, the existence of God and at the same time proclaim his attributes. It is by exercise of our reason that we are enabled to contemplate God in his works, and imitate him in his ways. When we see his care and kindness extended over all his creatures it teaches us our duty towards each other, while it calls forth our gratitude to him.

Again he remarks:

The Almighty Lecturer (Deity), by displaying the principles of science in the structure of the universe, has invited man to study and to imitation. It is as if He had said to the inhabitants of this globe, that we call ours, “I have made an earth for man to dwell upon, and I have rendered the starry heavens visible, to teach him science and the arts. He can now provide for his own comfort, and learn from my munificence to all, to be kind to each other.”<sup>1</sup>

*Yearning for the light.* May not what is here set forth as conveying a message from the “structure of the universe” be regarded as far-fetched? And on the important questions submitted in this chapter, what does that message definitely say? Nothing. Lame and impotent must be the verdict respecting these messages supposed to come from “the heavens and the glory of them,” and from the “structure of the universe.” When measured by their value as answers to the questions put forth in this chapter, they fail to satisfy the inquiring mind. And what is more, and necessary to be connected with what we have here said upon this appeal to the universe for knowledge, and its failure to

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<sup>b</sup>Thomas Paine (1737-1809), patriot, political philosopher of the American revolution (*Rights of Man*, 1791) and Enlightenment Deist, whose *Age of Reason* (1794) ridiculed traditional Christianity.

<sup>1</sup>“Age of Reason” Paine’s *Theological Works*, 32-33.

give an adequate answer—the mental powers of man, so far as developed, give no ground of hope that he will ever have the ability, more than he has it now, to formulate an answer from “the things that are made,” to the questions we have submitted.

What, then, is left? To what source shall man turn for help to aid him in rending the veil of mystery that surrounds him and the vast universe? Do we really “stand between two barren peaks” crying in vain, “Whence, Why and Whither?”<sup>2</sup> And is there no voice answering from the silence on either side to instruct the mind and quiet the spirit of restless man in his search for a solution of these mysteries? Has none of the higher intelligences we have supposed to be inhabiting the distant and older worlds found it in his heart to send some friendly message of hope and assurance by enkindling knowledge as to why all is that is, and as it is? A message that would solve the mystery, break the spell of ignorance and clear the vision? Is not that or something akin to that the only hope for solution to all these inquiries? And may it not be true that something like that has happened? May it not be that the traditions of our race, held in varied forms, about a down-bending in some way or other of some higher intelligence imparting knowledge about the world and the purpose of its existence, and something about man’s origin and destiny? And may this not be what that same tradition calls revelation?

*Of tradition in general.* Surely what we have observed about the universe and the probability of millions of other worlds than our own being inhabited by great intelligences—greater than those of our world—would tend to the conception of the possibility of ~~such a thing.~~ **their sending forth a revelation as we have supposed.** And not only to the possibility of it, but to the probability of it, since they are as likely to possess the altruistic spirit as *well as their* high mental endowments. Shall we not, then, give attention to the tradition of mankind? May there not be substance in it? Shall we be justified in our search after truth if we neglect this possible source of knowledge? Is tradition to be despised because it bears the name “tradition”? Sometimes tradition may carry on its broad stream—unworthy things—mere myths and childish fables, I know; but may we not use discrimination as to other things not fables and rightly divide the word of truth from the error in this as in other things?

Tradition, of course, comes out of the dim past; but we are not compelled to begin with its beginning. It is possible to go up-stream as

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<sup>2</sup>Ingersol’s oration at the grave of his brother.

well as down. Let us in our first view at least consider tradition and the force of it by going up-stream rather than down. Take this notion that comes from tradition about the existence of a deity. How came it to us? This present generation learned it from the last generation. And whence did they get it? From the generation that preceded their own; and they of a previous generation; and so on, back and back, into the time ages of antiquity. The tradition of a deity is so old “that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.” We may not be able to trace it quite to its source, but it is something transmitted from a great antiquity down to the present day.

*The Hebrew tradition.* The Hebrew race felt especially called upon to keep alive this tradition of God, and of creation, and all that goes with it, which they had received from their ancestors even before they were separated from the main Semitic race in the valley of the Euphrates. This, together with the traditions which grew out of the alleged “oral law”<sup>c</sup> through their great prophet Moses, which God is said to have delivered to Moses by word of mouth, this they committed to tradition which in time came to be regarded as well nigh at par with their “scripture” or the “sacred books.”<sup>3</sup> One of the ancient Hebrew prophets, in a very ecstasy of enthusiasm for tradition says:

Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from the[ir] children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to ⟨our⟩ [their] children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. (Ps. 78:1-7)

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<sup>c</sup>“According to rabbinic Judaism, ‘oral tradition’ is the authoritative interpretation of the Written Law [Torah]. Judaism understands the oral tradition to have been given by God to Moses on Sinai and therefore to be equal in authority and holiness to the Written Torah, represented by the Pentateuch.” Alan J. Avery-Peck, “Oral Tradition (Judaism),” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5:34. The earliest explicit mention of the Oral Torah is in the Mishnah tractate *‘Abot* 1:1-18 from the third century A.D., although indirect evidence indicates the basic idea is much older. See Jacob Neusner, *The Oral Torah* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>See A. H. Sayce, “Monumental Testimony to the Old Testament,” in Wright, *Bible Treasury*, 27-42. Also Cruden, “Tradition” in *Cruden’s Complete Concordance*.

Another prophet said of the knowledge that the Hebrews had received concerning God:

Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons and thy sons' sons. (Deut. 4:9)

*The God of tradition.* The traditions respecting God in the higher forms of them, represent him usually as the creator and preserver of all things. And this is found among nearly all nations and races of men. Even among some of the undeveloped peoples of the earth traces of tradition in this phase of it, are to be found; as well as in the traditions of the Hebrew race. It is found in all the mythologies of the ancient world, as well among the Greeks and Romans as among the Hebrews. Also in the mythologies—which are but varied forms of tradition—of India, China, Egypt, and the American Indians; all these, in one form or another, carry this phase of the tradition of God as the origin of all things and the directing force of all movement.

*Origin Sources of tradition.* Following this stream of tradition upward must finally bring us to its source. For however far distant the head of it may be, it must disclose a beginning.

*From fear.* There are only two sources whence it could start. One would be that the god idea came to man out of his experiences with the elements, destructive and benign, with which he was forced into contact; and out of which contact primitive man created his god idea. Those who regard this as the source of the god idea of the human race, stress man's experiences with the destructive forces of the world rather than with the benign forces. Primitive man heard the thunder and trembled; he saw the flash of lightning, and hid in terror; the earth beneath him shook, and he was sick with dread; fierce tempests uprooted the forest and destroyed his rude dwellings; desolating sickness visited the tribe and swept half of it to death; famine stalked through the land and took its toll. Reasoning from introspection of his own nature, and finding that when he was angry with a rival in the struggle for food—which meant struggle for existence; or in fierce contests for desirable mates, and for other earth-possession, he was moved by bitter hatred, and he sought to destroy those with whom he was angry. Hence when he found himself assailed by destructive forces, he reasoned that whatever, or whoever, invoked these destructive forces against him were angry with him, and hence he sought to appease their wrath. Thus came the conception of angry gods, who

must be propitiated and generally with sacrifices, sometimes human sacrifices, as affording the most precious of offerings.

~~*Influence of From gratitude on the God idea.*~~ There is, however, a kindlier side to this notion of the origin of the god idea arising from man's experiences. Man is capable of the emotion of gratitude as well as of fear. He takes note of what makes for his prosperity, for his health, for his peace and for the plenty which ministers to his comfort, as well as of calamitous events. He is grateful for the sunshine which warms the earth, for the gentle rains which with the sunshine accelerate life, and makes the earth fruitful. He rejoices at the plentifulness of the wild life on which he feeds, for the food supplies in ocean, and river, and forests, and plain. Hence *primitive* man's gratitude to whatever powers there be that produce this abundance on which he feeds; that clothes him, and makes him prosperous. He is aware that all this comes not from himself, but seems to be the result of the beneficence of the powers that stand back of all these manifestations of good-will towards men; and so out of a sense of gratitude man makes acknowledgment through offerings that he believes must be pleasing to the powers that so bless him. Hence came to man conceptions of benign deities who must be worshipped.

*Tradition as broken fragments of revelation.* It may be conceded that tradition of the god idea comes from both these sources—fear and gratitude; for we still have among the undeveloped tribes of men those who entertain the first idea of God—he is a being to be feared for his wrath which must be appeased. There are large masses of the world's population that have not received the enlightenment that would surely come from revelation; and hence they are still in that less than half enlightened state where men group [grope] about in great uncertainty with reference to knowledge of God. In some cases, however, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that the partial enlightenment such men possess comes from the broken fragments of previously known revelation among their ancestors, or contact with those who have been so enlightened. That tradition which has its source—even though indirectly—from revelation, is of much firmer texture than that which has its commencement in the experiences of the race in contact only with the forces of nature, benign and malignant; and of which their God idea is but the interpretation.

~~*Tradition fragment from revelation.*~~ That part of the stream of tradition which has its source in revelation, according to the Hebrew scriptures represents man in association with God in the early morning of the world, manifested in the most intimate relations by tangible



presence and conversation, man even naming the animal creation as they were presented to him by the creator; “and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” Then came the fall of man, which separated him from this familiar association with God. But in the wreck that seems to have followed this seeming disaster, one thing was preserved, viz.: man’s knowledge of God. That knowledge which man had of God in Eden, he brought with him into the “outer world” into which he was banished.

According to the Hebrew scripture account of the ante-deluvian Patriarchs, this tradition about God had opportunity to become well grounded. These Patriarchs each lived to attain to a great age, so that they were contemporaneous with each other for several hundreds of years; and not only brought the Eden-acquired knowledge of God into a post-Eden world, but brought it also from the ante-deluvian world to the post-deluvian era.

*Written tradition.* It may be thought that in the last paragraph dealing with tradition of the Hebrews—really found in their “scriptures”—we have been appealing to revelation, to the Bible, instead of tradition, as men commonly understand tradition, viz.: something handed down from age to age by oral communication without the aid of written memorials. But the Bible may be regarded in more than one aspect. Commonly it is held to be a volume of inspired writings, revelations indeed; but also, without inconsistency, it may be regarded as a body of traditions crystallized into writings, and it may not be contradicted that traditions may be written as well as other things. It is in this sense that I have at this point considered it, viz.: as a record of the Hebrew traditions.

This tradition concerning the existence of God or of Gods, speaking now with reference to tradition in general, without reference to any particular people, or special conceptions of what kind of beings the gods may be—this general tradition is so old that ~~“the memory of man runneth not to the contrary;”~~ and it may not be thrust aside as unworthy to have influence upon the great task upon which we are engaged—viz. our search for the knowledge of God. This human-race tradition of God rises to the character of a universal or truly catholic tradition: it has been practically believed, we may say, “always; everywhere; and by everybody.”<sup>d</sup> It is worthy of respectful consideration, and such it is to receive in these pages.

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<sup>d</sup>Roberts refers to the famous Vincentian Canon of Vincent of Lerins (d. c. 450), *Commonitorium*, 2, defining Roman Catholic doctrine as *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, “what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.”

The other remaining source for the knowledge of God is revelation; but that is a theme so large that it will require a chapter by itself for the consideration of it.

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Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Josephus, *Works of Flavius Josephus*, bks. 1-2 and 12 ch. 10; Roberts, *Gospel*, 3d ed., ch. 9; Smith, *Six Lectures on Faith*; Deut. 4, esp. vs. 9 through end; Ps. 78.