

## ARTICLE

### THE NATURE-MIRACLES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE Nature-miracles of the Old Testament have a twofold significance. They illuminate the Hebrew conception of Nature, and they are an important feature in the method of divine revelation. But, if they are to be understood, they must be approached in their proper historical environment, and with the thought-forms of the age that felt their cogency. We must not make them more difficult to understand by imposing on the Hebrew mind a modern view of Nature. 'The fundamental principle in the world-outlook of the primitive man is that everything is possible.'<sup>1</sup>

It follows from this that any attempt to classify the Nature-miracles statistically as supernatural events would be futile, if not impossible. We should have to include ordinary rain amongst the 'miracles', whilst angelic visitation or possession by good or evil spirits is a normal explanation of certain physical or psychical phenomena. But a contemporary approach to the whole subject can be made through the three chief terms used in the Old Testament to denote 'miracle'. These are *'oth* or 'sign', *mopheth* or 'portent', and *niphlaoth* (with related forms) or 'wonders'.

1. (a) The first of these, *'oth*, occurs 79 times, of which 25 relate to the plagues of Egypt. As a material 'sign', the term is used of the tribal mark on Cain, the scarlet cord by which Rahab's house was indicated, the ensign marking particular family groups in the Israelite camp, the stone memorials of the crossing of the Jordan, the blood of the passover sacrifice smeared on Israelite dwellings, the metal censers of Korah and his company, when beaten out to cover the altar as a memorial of their penalty.<sup>2</sup> From these examples the general meaning of the term is apparent; it can denote any physical object to which some special meaning has been given. In more extended use, it can refer to circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham, or the Sabbath as a sign of that with Israel at Sinai, or the rainbow as a sign of that with Noah.<sup>3</sup> The application of this term to the rainbow is particularly instructive; it shows how 'miraculous' meaning could be given to what is for us a purely natural phenomenon. We inevitably regard the rainbow as a permanent result of the refraction of light; we can no more believe that it was put in the sky

<sup>1</sup> S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, ii. 224.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. iv. 15; Joshua ii. 12; Num. ii. 2; Joshua iv. 6; Exod. xii. 13; Num. xvi. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. xvii. 11; Exod. xxxi. 13, 17; Gen. ix. 12.

as a covenant sign than we can regard it in the earlier way as the battle-bow of Indra or of Marduk hung up there when the divine battle was over. In the priestly narrative of creation, the sun, moon, and stars are 'for signs and for seasons', the reference being to the ecclesiastical calendar as ruled by the movements of the heavenly bodies.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Jeremiah bids Israel not to be perturbed by those 'signs of the heavens' (such as eclipses) which dismay the heathen.<sup>2</sup> For the sign given to Hezekiah of the turning back of the shadow on the steps of Ahaz,<sup>3</sup> there is no natural explanation; it may be due, like the standing still of the sun during Joshua's victory over the Amorites,<sup>4</sup> to the prosaic interpretation of a poetic metaphor describing Hezekiah's recovery from sickness.

The use of 'oth for events in human lives to which some special meaning is given does not directly belong to a study of Nature, but it should be noted as forming a parallel to the interpretation of ordinary phenomena as 'signs'. Thus Jonathan makes the reaction of the Philistines to his climbing attack the sign that will warrant or forbid further advance; Samuel makes the meeting of Saul with a company of prophets a sign of the divine co-operation with him; the death of Eli's two sons on the same day will be a sign of the divine judgement on his house.<sup>5</sup> Once more we see that it is not the abnormality of the event that makes the sign, but its interpretation in a particular pattern of divine control. This is probably the right view to take of the Immanuel sign given by Isaiah; it was a normal birth which would acquire prophetic meaning.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, as in the symbolic acts of the prophets,<sup>7</sup> the event itself is arbitrarily created in order to be a miniature of that larger activity of God which it initiates.<sup>7</sup> Isaiah goes about Jerusalem 'naked and barefoot' as 'a sign and a portent' of the future captivity of the Egyptians and Ethiopians on whom Israel is tempted to rely.<sup>8</sup> Such usage throws the emphasis of the 'oth very strongly on the meaning assigned to it, and again warns us that the sign is not essentially and intrinsically anything opposed to the normal phenomena of Nature. Indeed, the very names that Isaiah and his children bear are 'signs and portents'.<sup>9</sup> Nor were men to think that the announcement of a sign afterwards fulfilled proved the giver of it to be a true prophet;<sup>10</sup> God may allow such a fulfilment in order to test the loyalty of Israel, who must dis-

<sup>1</sup> So Skinner, ad loc., as against Gunkel; cf. Driver, ad loc.

<sup>2</sup> Jer. x. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. xxxviii. 7, 22, cf. 2 Kings xx. 8, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua x. 12, 13.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Sam. xiv. 10; x. 7, 9; ii. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Isa. vii. 11, 14; cf. G. B. Gray, ad loc.

<sup>7</sup> See my article on 'Hebrew Sacrifice and Prophetic Symbolism' in *J.T.S.* July-Oct. 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Isa. xx. 3, cf. Ezek. iv. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Isa. viii. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Deut. xiii. 2, 3.

regard even accomplished signs if the prophet's message was contrary to the true national tradition. Thus miracles were not necessarily a proof that a particular prophecy was true.<sup>1</sup>

(b) The parallel and often associated term, *mopheth* or portent, occurs 36 times, and in 19 of these refers to the plagues of Egypt. Etymologically it has been connected with an Arabic root, meaning 'to suffer harm',<sup>2</sup> and the usage seems to support this, and to justify the English rendering 'portent', with its predominant suggestion of 'calamity'. The future destruction of the altar at Bethel on which Jeroboam proposed to make an illegitimate offering was such a portent.<sup>3</sup> The Deuteronomic curses against disloyalty are signs and portents.<sup>4</sup> A psalmist speaks of his sufferings as having made him a portent to many.<sup>5</sup> Joel pictures the great and terrible day of Yahweh as ushered in by:

portents in the heavens and on the earth,  
blood and fire and columns of smoke.  
The sun shall be changed to darkness  
And the moon to blood. (iii. 3, 4; EVV. ii. 30, 31)

Such a description is obviously drawn from an eclipse, raised to its eschatological degree. Ezekiel's acted symbolism of exile from Jerusalem is spoken of as a portent, as is his conduct at the death of his wife; for the calamity the customary laments were inadequate.<sup>6</sup> That the word *mopheth* could connote good as well as evil, we may see from Zechariah's reference to the chief priest and his companions as 'men of *mopheth*';<sup>7</sup> they are a promise and prophecy of the Messianic kingdom which is to be. The frequent use of the term together with 'oth shows that they are close synonyms. The chief difference between them may be put in S. R. Driver's words,<sup>8</sup> '*Mopheth* is a portent, an occurrence regarded merely as something extraordinary: 'oth is a sign, i.e. something ordinary (Exod. xii. 13, xxxi. 13, Isa. xx. 3, &c.) or extraordinary, as the case may be, regarded as significant of a truth beyond itself, or impressed with a Divine purpose.' We may illustrate the difference by the fact that 'oth is used in the first chapter of Genesis of the regular course of the sun, whilst we have just seen that the eclipse of the sun can be described as a *mopheth*. But neither term necessarily implies what 'miracle' suggests to us, i.e. 'a marvellous event exceeding the known powers

<sup>1</sup> At an earlier time, the inspiration of a false prophecy could be accepted as genuine, but its contents were ascribed to a lying spirit commissioned by Yahweh; this is illustrated by Micaiah's vision (1 Kings xxii. 22).

<sup>2</sup> مِفْ, Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, i. 88; so Gesenius, *Thesaurus*, i. 143, s.v. מִפֶּת.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings xiii. 3, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Deut. xxviii. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. lxxi. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ezek. xii. 6, 11; xxiv. 24, 27.

<sup>7</sup> iii. 8.

<sup>8</sup> On Deut. iv. 34.

of nature, and therefore supposed to be due to the special intervention of the Deity or of some supernatural agency'.<sup>1</sup> There is no such Hebrew separation between the natural and the supernatural as that definition implies; Nature is already supernatural, though it can be raised to new meaning.

(c) The third term, *niphlaoth*, occurs 51 times, whilst there are a certain number of verbal and nominal derivatives from the same root, *pala'*, which also have to be taken into account. The plural participle used as a noun, *niphlaoth*, is, however, central, and can be rendered 'wonders'. Such a rendering brings it nearer to the etymology of our English word, 'miracle', though not to its implication in our usage of a sharp division between natural and supernatural. The cognates of the Hebrew term suggest that the root meaning is the quite general one of distinction or separation.<sup>2</sup> An allied form of the verb (פלה) occurs in the words of Moses: 'If thou goest with us, then we shall be *separated*, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth.'<sup>3</sup> Israel is itself a miracle, a wonder, through the divine providence. 'Wonders' are outstanding events to be distinguished from ordinary occurrences. Those who go down to the sea in ships see Yahweh's wonders when His storm-wind drives up the waves of the sea.<sup>4</sup> The rain is elsewhere ranked as an outstanding example of His wonders.<sup>5</sup> The miracle of the rain is strikingly brought out in Deuteronomy,<sup>6</sup> which contrasts Palestine with Egypt. The irrigation of Egypt is carried out by mechanical means (from the Nile), but Palestine is watered by rain directly from heaven, because Yahweh has it under His special care. That is a very instructive commentary on the interpretation of natural phenomena. Elihu names 'the balancings of the clouds' as amongst the supreme wonders of God (*miphla'ah*).<sup>7</sup> God's voice in the thunder is wonderful; Nature's ways as a whole are too wonderful for Job to understand.<sup>8</sup> The heavens, by their very constitution, praise the wondrousness of Yahweh; in Jeremiah's words,<sup>9</sup> 'thou hast made the heavens and the earth by thy great power and by thy outstretched arm; nothing is too wondrous for thee'. These statements about the ordinary course of Nature, as we reckon it, give us the Hebrew approach also to what we should account 'miracles', such as the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua, or the child-bearing of Sarah in advanced years.<sup>10</sup> These are to be regarded as extensions of the divine power which is

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Shorter English Dictionary*, s.v.

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic *fala* (Hebrew *palah*) means 'wean', the Ethiopic *falaya* 'divide'.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. xxxiii. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ps. cvii. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Job v. 9f.

<sup>6</sup> xi. 10-12.

<sup>7</sup> Job xxxvii. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Job xxxvii. 5, xlii. 3.

<sup>9</sup> xxxii. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua iii. 5; Gen. xviii. 14.

being constantly exercised in more normal occurrences—the wonders of the deep, the mystery of all child-birth.<sup>1</sup> Some divine wonders, however, pass beyond this, as when the angel of Yahweh—the visible manifestation of Yahweh—ascends in the flame of sacrifice before the eyes of Manoaah and his wife. The angel's very name is *pi'l'i*, 'wonderful', beyond human comprehension.<sup>2</sup>

Wonders will mark the apocalyptic future, as at the overthrow of the city of Chaos in the Isaianic apocalypse or of empires in Danielic visions;<sup>3</sup> only Sheol is regarded (at earlier periods) as out of bounds for Yahweh's activity:

Is it for the dead that thou wilt do wonders?  
 Will the *rephaim* arise to thank thee? . . .  
 Will thy wonders be made known in the darkness,  
 Or thy righteousness in the land of oblivion?

(Ps. lxxxviii. 11, 13)

God's wonders, seen in their providential aspects, become His 'mighty acts' (*geburoth*, Deut. iii. 24) and His 'righteousnesses' (*zedhakoṭh*, 1 Sam. xii. 7). Nature and history alike serve to reveal Him, for they are equally under His control, and are closely linked as the common sphere of *'oth*, *mopheth*, and *niphlaoth*. Nature and history are simply different aspects of the continued activity of God, and miracles are the representative occasions on which that activity specially impresses human consciousness.

2. The Nature-theophanies, the manifestations of God through physical phenomena, deserve particular attention. They bring to a focus the general miracle of all Nature as the handiwork of God. But the theophany is a transient manifestation of deity, and, as such, to be distinguished from the continuous revelation of Him in all Nature. This may be illustrated from Isaiah's inaugural vision. The antiphonal song of the seraphim is 'the fulness (the full content) of all the earth is His glory'.<sup>4</sup> This manifestation of Him in all created things forms the background to the momentary manifestation of the divine being given to the prophet. The characteristic of the Nature-theophany is rather its intensity than any peculiarity of essence. The thunder is always the voice of God, even though its articulate interpretation is only occasional. The theophany is essentially 'more of the same thing'.

<sup>1</sup> Ps. cvii. 24; cxxxix. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Judges xiii. 18; cf. Ps. cxxxix. 6, where the use of the same adjective for the growth of the embryo is significant.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. xxv. 1; Dan. xii. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Isa. vi. 3. As Duhm points out (*ad loc.*), we must not exclude Nature from this 'glory', even though it is not until Deutero-Isaiah that we get the fuller and more explicit appeal to God's revelation in Nature.

One of the earliest theophanies, that of the Burning Bush,<sup>1</sup> is also one of the simplest. We find Moses in the neighbourhood of 'the mountain of God', Horeb: 'and the angel of Yahweh appeared unto him in a flame of fire from the midst of the (bramble) bush (*hasseneh*),<sup>2</sup> and he looked, and behold! the bush was burning with fire and the bush was not consumed.' Here, as elsewhere, the term 'angel of Yahweh' denotes a temporary manifestation of Yahweh, to be regarded as His presence in human form, and not an angel in the ordinary sense of an independent heavenly being. As a Nature-theophany, the interest of the bush is that it links with primitive ideas of the life in all vegetation, and of fire as peculiarly associated with deity. The reference to vegetation is brought out more clearly in the phrase of Deut. xxxiii. 16, 'the good will of Him who dwells in the bush', which suggests a more permanent connexion, such as we often see in the Old Testament references to sacred trees. All life had its mystery, but to the desert-dweller the vegetation of the oasis had peculiar significance. The flame of fire which is here associated with the bush is a familiar feature of theophanies and may be regarded as the physical phenomenon manifesting Yahweh beyond all others.

Fire-theophanies may be illustrated by the references to the pillar of fire and cloud which figures in the stories of the Exodus and desert wanderings, manifesting the divine presence and veiling His 'glory'. Indeed, 'the glory of Yahweh' is pre-eminently a fiery manifestation of His being, as when at Sinai 'the appearance of the glory of Yahweh was like devouring fire on the top of the mount',<sup>3</sup> and the face of Moses afterwards sent out rays of derived light.<sup>4</sup> On Carmel, it was the fire of Yahweh that consumed the offering,<sup>5</sup> and the (later) conception of a Shechinah was of a fiery presence. Such descriptions are not to be regarded as a figure of speech; the glory *is* fire, though charged with the added mystery of the divine activity. Thus Abraham sees God passing between the divided sacrifice (according to the ritual of primitive covenant-making), in the form of 'a smoking furnace and a flaming torch'.<sup>6</sup> A prophet asks, 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?'<sup>7</sup> Similarly with the word *ruach*, which denotes both the wind of the desert and the 'Spirit' of God; the physical wind *is* a divine activity, and the Spirit acts like a blast of wind.

<sup>1</sup> Exod. iii.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lundgreen, *Pflanzenwelt*, p. 47: 'Dass hier der Baum nur ein 𐤇𐤍𐤏, ein Stachelgewächs, ist, erklärt sich daraus, dass man solche am Horeb besonders häufig fand.'

<sup>3</sup> Exod. xxiv. 16, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Exod. xxxiv. 29 ff.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings xviii. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. xv. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. xxxiii. 14; cf. x. 17; Mal. iii. 2; Num. xi. 1; Deut. ix. 3.

The hot blast of the sirocco is regarded as a form of the fiery activity of Yahweh, just as fire and wind are associated at Pentecost. Another parallel to this significant evidence of identical vocabulary is supplied by the word *kol*, which means both 'thunder' and 'voice'. The thunder was as much the voice of God as the wind was His breath and the fire His consuming activity. Every thunderstorm was a potential theophany.<sup>1</sup>

At Sinai occurred the cardinal theophany which set the pattern for so many others, experienced or imagined. Sinai, wherever it lay, was, until Zion usurped its place, the mountain of God, *par excellence*, the mountain of which Yahweh could say, 'I brought you unto myself'.<sup>2</sup> The present narrative in Exod. xix, xx, xxiv, is confused, owing to the combination of three different documents. Of these, the Elohist gives most detail of the method of revelation. On the morning of the third day, 'there were thunders and lightnings and a heavy cloud upon the mountain and the sound of a horn very loud. . . . Moses used to speak and God used to answer him by thunder.'<sup>3</sup> Thus, as S. R. Driver has said, 'the repeated thunderings were interpreted as God's part in a dialogue with Moses'.<sup>4</sup> All the three narratives make Moses the unique channel of the revelation, the essential interpreter of whatever physical phenomena mediated it. In J, whilst the elders also are called up the mountain, they prostrate themselves afar off, and Moses alone draws near to God.<sup>5</sup> But a theophanic vision is given to them; 'They saw the God of Israel; and under His feet was a sort of sapphire pavement, like the heart of heaven for brightness'.<sup>6</sup> In P, the 'glory' rests on the mountain, the cloud covering it for six days; the glory is like devouring fire. On the seventh day, Moses is called up alone into the midst of the cloud.

Some<sup>7</sup> have found volcanic as well as storm phenomena in the happenings at Sinai, e.g. in the pall of smoke resting on the mountain.<sup>8</sup> The combination is not impossible; if accepted, it would affect the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Duhm on Ps. xcvi. 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Exod. xix. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. xix. 16, 19; the tenses are frequentative.

<sup>4</sup> On Exod. xix. 19. We may compare John xii. 28, where the voice from heaven is regarded by the multitude as thunder. For O.T. passages showing thunder to be God's voice, see 1 Sam. xii. 18; Job xxxvi. 33-xxxvii. 5; also cf. Ps. xviii. 14, xxix. 3-9; 1 Sam. vii. 10; Exod. ix. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Exod. xxiv. 1 f.

<sup>6</sup> xxiv. 9 f. A covenant meal follows in this independent narrative.

<sup>7</sup> Most fully W. J. Phythian-Adams, *The Call of Israel*, Part III. Against the attribution, see Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, ed. 5/6, i. 348, n. 2; Mowinkel, *Psalmstudien*, ii, 215 n.

<sup>8</sup> xix. 18 (J); xx. 18 (E).

question of the geographical position of Sinai.<sup>1</sup> But the evidence is not so clear as is sometimes alleged,<sup>2</sup> and we have always to remember the marked syncretistic tendencies of theophanic descriptions. The account of any theophany, whether actually experienced or poetically imagined by prophet or psalmist, would tend more and more towards conventionalized language, to which features of storm, earthquake, and volcanic activity would all contribute. We can see this in the 'literary' theophanies.

For the 'literary' theophanies, Sinai naturally supplied a pattern, for it was the classic example. Besides their greater elaboration of detail in the repeated descriptions of storm-phenomena we often find mythological elements, such as references to the victory won by Marduk over Tiamat:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of Yahweh. . . .  
Art thou not it that cut Rahab in pieces, that pierced the dragon?  
(Isa. li. 9)

That is not from the description of a theophany actually experienced, as at Sinai, but from a prayer for one in the future, though after the pattern of the deliverance from Egypt. In the great theophany of the eighteenth psalm (from verse 10), Yahweh comes in the storm, riding upon a cherub and flying swiftly on the wings of the wind, to lay bare the foundations of the world.<sup>3</sup> In Habakkuk iii, the rhetorical repudiation of the ancient mythological attack on monsters leads up to the new occasion for a theophany directed against human foes:

Was thine anger against the rivers,  
Or thy wrath against the sea,  
That thou didst ride upon thine horses,  
Upon thy chariots of salvation? (verse 8)

In some instances the storm enters realistically into the battle, by bringing panic on the foe, or otherwise helping in their overthrow. This is noticeably true of the victory celebrated in the Song of Deborah, when the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, and the storm-filled wady Kishon swept them away. Prophetic speakers naturally emphasize the divine part in the battle; but this is not to be taken to exclude human co-operation with God.<sup>4</sup> In the classical

<sup>1</sup> The Sinai tradition of J and P seems to place the mountain near Kadesh; the Horeb tradition of E on the east of the Gulf of Akabah. Cf. McNeile, *Exodus*, pp. cii ff.

<sup>2</sup> In xix. 18, the quaking of the earth in MT disappears in LXX, where, with more probability, in view of the verb used, it is the people who 'quake', as in verse 16.

<sup>3</sup> For the reference to Sinai, cf. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, p. 106; and note Ps. lxxvii. 16 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Isa. xiii. 13, 'I will make the heavens to tremble', &c., with verse 17, 'I will stir up the Medes against them'; also Exod. xvii. 8 ff., where the



description of the Day of Yahweh given by Zephaniah (i. 14 ff.) the culminating point is the sound of the horn and the battle-shout of attacking enemies. But in the theophanic storm which is to bring about the overthrow of Assyria, according to Isa. xxx. 27 ff., there is no mention of Judah's warriors, and the suggestion is of panic falling upon the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

The use of primitive mythology in Nature-theophanies and related passages need not imply that the historic belief in Yahweh ever passed through a phase comparable with that of the Babylonian creation myths, or the Ugaritic mythology. To some extent, at least, the elaboration of mythology outside Israel, and the literary usage within Israel, form parallel lines of development, both of them going back to the *mana* of earlier days, pre-polytheistic and pre-Yahwistic. Just as the biologist regards man as a parallel, though far higher, development to that of the apes, rather than as a direct descendant from them, so we may speak of the henotheism of Israel, whilst admitting its partial kinship with the polytheism and crude mythology of Babylonia and Canaan. But both go back to the primitive cradle of a belief that all nature is alive with the mystery of superhuman power.

3. To say this, of course, affords no explanation of the peculiar quality of the development within Israel. For this, we must look to the prophetic interpretation of both Nature and history. We may, like an early narrator, ascribe the actual deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians to the timely blowing of an east wind that made possible a passage through the waters: 'Yahweh caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night.'<sup>2</sup> But the merely physical event would not become a miracle of deliverance until it found an interpreter in Yahweh's prophet. Interpretation is inseparable from miracles of the Old Testament pattern. We begin at the wrong end if we try first to rationalize them, and to reduce them to their smallest nucleus of historical event. We should begin rather with the faith of both prophet and people, by which the events of the physical world, normal or abnormal, were interpreted in a particular context of history. All Nature, as we have seen, is potentially miraculous, and continually manifests the wonders of God. At particular points of time and space this wonder may be intensified, or given a new meaning

uplifted hands of Moses secure divine help to the Israelites fighting against Amalek.

<sup>1</sup> So Procksch, ad loc.

<sup>2</sup> Exod. xiv. 21 (J); cf. x. 13 (J), where the east wind brings up the locusts, and xv. 25 (J), where a tree is used to sweeten bitter water. For a possible theory of the contribution of sand and tide to the Israelite crossing of the Red Sea, cf. T. H. Robinson, *Z.A.W.* 1933, pp. 170 ff.

by its incorporation in a new context. The prophetic interpretation creates the *religious* fact, just as the relation to God transforms moral evil into the religious fact of 'sin'. The psychical factor in the religious fact is of primary importance, both for the proper exegesis of the Old Testament literature, i.e. the recovery of the original Hebrew emphasis, and also for any right conception of miracle. It is only when the event is lifted into the realm of the personal relation between God and man, the realm of faith, that the triple sequence of prayer, providence, and miracle becomes intelligible, without losing its profound mystery. Prayer, providence, miracle, alike depend on the reciprocity of God and man in the unity of the religious fact. The glory of sunrise and sunset depends on the atmosphere of earth as much as on the sun's relation to it. The commonest act of perception is a complex unity of the subjective and objective factors. Why, then, should not this be true of the act of religious perception which constitutes faith?

When we come to the study of the prophetic consciousness, we often see how vital and important this interpretative element becomes. Meanwhile we may note the preparation for this complex unity in the religious appreciation of Nature. Perhaps the rather enigmatic incident of Elijah's experience at Horeb bears on this, and marks a transition to fuller consciousness of the psychical factor: 'Behold! as Yahweh was passing, there was a great and powerful wind tearing away mountains and breaking up rocks before Yahweh; but Yahweh was not in the wind. After the wind there was a shaking, but Yahweh was not in the shaking. After the shaking there was fire, but Yahweh was not in the fire. After the fire there was a sound (coming) from thin silence.'<sup>1</sup> Prophecy was in process of becoming more consciously psychical in its medium, hearing the articulate word, in place of seeing the physical event.

The Elijah and Elisha stories provide a further main group of Nature-miracles in the Old Testament, as distinct from the much more important Exodus stories. In these prophetic stories the accretion of the legendary element is obvious, being such accretion as will always gather round forceful personalities in all generations, though the categories of explanation will differ. The psychical factor is here prominent in the making of the event, as well as in its interpretation.<sup>2</sup> It is useless to inquire exactly what happened on Carmel, and what might have been seen by a cool and dispassionate spectator of scientific

<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings xix. 11, 12; or (cf. Burney and B.-D.-B.) 'the sound of a light whisper'. As Hempel rightly emphasizes (*Gott und Mensch*, p. 9, n. 3) 'hearing' involves a much less close contact with God than 'seeing' Him. Cf. Deut. iv. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Elisha's curse can evoke two bears to devour forty-two little children.

temper; there were no such people there. But Elijah is obviously a man of dominating personality, quite apart from his use of symbolic magic when he crouched on Carmel in the semblance of a rain-cloud, and of his super-normal frenzy in running as fast as could the chariot-horses of Ahab. We certainly cannot hope to analyse out the physical and psychical factors in whatever happened, and we must leave room for a ministry of illusion.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is perfectly clear to the student of Israel's religion that the event on Carmel was of great importance for the future, and marked the victory of Yahwism over Baalism as a rival religion. The providence of God is seen in the unity of the religious fact, whatever its components. The supreme miracle of the Old Testament is the historical development of the religion of Israel,<sup>2</sup> and that is inseparable from the religious interpretation of Nature.

The close relation of the Nature-miracles to the history is apparent from the outset. Both the Exodus and its interpretative complement at Sinai-Horeb depend on 'miracle' in the large sense implied in this discussion. Israel's religion of the higher, i.e. the prophetic kind, is as truly a redemptive religion as that which springs from the Christian faith. But the Exodus, like the Cross, has no religious value apart from its interpretation as an act of God. The integrated religious fact takes its own place in the history; compared with it, the precise details of the event, even if recoverable, are of secondary importance. Dr. Phythian-Adams, in his suggestive book, *The Call of Israel*, distinguishes three aspects of the miracle of this call—that of 'Material Coincidence', by which he means the physical phenomena of the time and place, that of 'Spiritual Coincidence', the presence of a competent interpreter, viz. Moses, and that of 'Sacramental Coincidence', viz. 'that there was in the nature of the phenomena themselves a reservoir of inexhaustible spiritual significance'.<sup>3</sup> By this last statement is meant the possibility of the continued and ever larger interpretation of the redemptive work of God which the subsequent religion of Israel actually displays. This analysis of the miracle can be accepted as true both for the religion of Israel and for those who inherit its faith in the God of Israel. The use of the term 'coincidence' is justified, because the events can be viewed on the lower level of mere event, where coincidence is ascribed to chance, as well as on the higher level at which an explanation is found in the divine purpose. The virility of Biblical religion is partly due to this

<sup>1</sup> On this, see *Redemption and Revelation* by H. Wheeler Robinson, ch. ii.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. A. MacCulloch, in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, viii. 679, and note especially Exod. xxxiv. 10 where what Yahweh does with Israel = His *niphlaoth*.

<sup>3</sup> Pp. 180-3.

realism, which always keeps close to the event. Hebrew theology, like Hebrew metaphor, emphasizes the end, rather than the means; thus in Ps. cvii the escape of the lost traveller, the prisoner, the sick man, the storm-tossed sailor are all reckoned as *niphlaoth* of God, for which men should praise Him. There is no concern with the means by which escape was made. Our modern analysis of Biblical miracles, so far as it accepts them as historical events of some kind or other, shows a longer and more complex chain of cause and effect than the Hebrews recognized; yet it still leaves open the equal possibility of faith in a divine Agent. But our desire to share the idealism of Israel must not blind us to its characteristic realism. There are perils in the higher interpretation of the data which may have very misleading consequences. It may lead to the arbitrary use of allegory as if it were dogmatic truth instead of more or less interesting 'Midrash'. It may ensnare us in a surreptitious dualism of shadow and substance which may explain the Epistle to the Hebrews, but is more Platonizing than Hebraic. It may, worst of all, lead to the distortion of the history itself as in timidly conservative or fundamentalistic formulations of it, which ask us to believe more than Hebrews themselves ever believed. The true approach is to maintain that the things which really happened to the Hebrews might still happen, or rather, that they do happen. But the faith that can interpret them, as they are interpreted in the Bible, is not of every age. Even when present, it will necessarily change its intellectual forms and theories from generation to generation, if its spiritual continuity is to be maintained. The essential truth for Biblical faith is that Nature, like history, is wholly under God's control; the manner of that control, which means the way in which successive generations formulate it for themselves, is of much interest, but in the long run of secondary importance.

H. WHEELER ROBINSON