

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Miracle and the New Testament.

II.

ON abstract grounds there would seem to be sufficiently weighty reasons for considering that the miracles recorded in the New Testament are not improbable. If a God exists, it is more credible that He would communicate with man and reveal to him the Divine Purpose than not. We believe that even in the Old Testament we have a record of such revelation, though under that Dispensation the light was "not clear nor dark." When this twilight gave way to the dayspring that was to broaden into the full noonday of revelation in the Gospel, a new and wondrous era was opening for mankind. Momentous changes were at hand. God was to be "manifest in the flesh," the mode of His existence to be revealed, the inmost characteristic being or nature of God to be disclosed, the plain message of everlasting salvation to be proclaimed to men, the personality of the Evil One, too, to be made known. Was not this a time—if ever—appropriate for the occurrence of the miraculous? Accordingly, this marvellous era begins with miracle—the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth—thus giving the key to the character of the whole. It would be, no doubt, claimed nowadays that in miracle was no sufficient sign of such a revelation. We are far from saying that it is only in miracles that we find such signs. But the popular belief has been always that miracle testifies to the immediate presence and special work of God. Could Jesus have revealed Himself as the Christ to the disciples without such miraculous evidences as appealed to them and they expected? And were not these true miracles? Would God allow the Christian belief to grow up based on illusions? Would the Church which condemned an Ananias have propagated its creed and gospel by means of falsehood in any form? As to the Virgin Birth, can we not see its appropriateness, perhaps even its necessity, and say the case must so have been? *Talis decet partus Deum*. And as to the last miracles of that marvellous life, we can see an equal appropriateness or necessity for these: the Resurrection and Ascension must have happened as the natural or inevitable climax of such a life.

We have to consider what kind of miracles those of the

New Testament are. They are in perfect harmony with the character of the gospel revelation and of Christ. No single one was wrought as a mere wonder. "Wonders" are never mentioned without "signs" in the New Testament. The revelation was mainly one of hope and love and forgiveness. How, then, could a Divine Saviour act without such deeds of love? "These," says Bishop Westcott of the Gospel miracles, "are works of faith, of intercession, of love . . . They speak to us of a power of love which transcends all known laws and spoils the grave of its victim" ("Characteristics of the Gospel Miracles," Allenson, pp. 38, 46). He notes that the miracles themselves are revelations, those over nature, of power; those of healing, of love; those over the kingdom of the Evil One, of judgment. "An Epiphany of judgment follows the epiphanies of power and love. He whom we first saw as the mighty Lord and then as the merciful Saviour, now appears to us as the Holy One of God" (p. 54). The miracles of Jesus, indeed, are not only in harmony with His character but so inextricably interwoven with His life that to get rid of the miracles would be to get rid of the life. His words and works run up into one another (see John xiv. 10, 11). The miracles are acted parables, the words and works are both "signs." They are intimately connected, as the Feeding of the Multitudes with the discourse on the Bread of Life; the healing of the man born blind with the declaration that Christ is the Light of the World, and His censure of the blinded Pharisees. "These miracles," says Dr. Illingworth, "flow naturally from a Person who despite His obvious humanity impresses us as being at home in two worlds. Miracles are inwoven in the very fabric of His Personality so that the attempt to disentangle the thread of His wonderful works would lead to the elimination of His Divinity. The Wonderful One could not but act in a wonderful way" ("Divine Immanence," p. 50). The first miracle and the rest act and react upon one another. The Incarnation gives credibility to the succeeding signs, and those signs strengthen the evidence for the truth of Jesus' claims. His miraculous works are put in the front of His credentials in the account we have of how men came to Him. It is obvious that they came because He wrought miracles. It is equally obvious that men preached Christianity because they believed miracles, and especially the greatest miracle of the Resurrection of Christ, to have taken place. The

author of "Ecce Homo" wrote, "Miracles play so important a part in Christ's scheme, that any theory which would represent them as entirely due to the imagination of His followers, or of a later age, destroys the credibility of the documents, not partially but wholly, and leaves Christ a personage as mythical as Hercules" (p. 41).

Nevertheless, some notice must be taken of the "explanations" or explainings away of the New Testament miracles by modernism and materialism. For example, the miraculous element in the miracles of healing is denied on the ground of faith-healing. Even demoniacs are said to have been persons suffering merely from nervous or mental disorders, as though to find the seat of a malady were synonymous with discovering its cause. We were formerly told that such healings could not be true because they were "miracles." Now it is said even if the evidence is good it is not evidence for the miraculous. This is worthless criticism. Of course, if the materialistic explanation of the human mind is accepted there is no place for miracles or even for religion. But if the nature of man's will or mind is not material but spiritual, and, being strongly excited, helps the body to throw off disease, this is the influence of spirit on matter. This power is intensified by religious or spiritual influence, and that is faith-healing. Such instances may represent in a low degree something of that which Jesus did, but it is plain that He acted always as He taught, *fully conscious of authority*. If the evidence is good for the miracles as occurrences it is also good for the miraculous nature of the occurrences, for a miracle assumes always the supremacy of the spiritual forces of the world to an extraordinarily marked degree over the material. It is urged, again, that as we do not accept the ordinary miracles of ecclesiastical history we ought not to accept those of the New Testament. But some of the former may have actually happened, especially in answer to prayer, and notably with regard to the exorcism of evil spirits in the early Christian centuries, and even in modern times. But, with such exceptions, the miracles of the New Testament are far superior in dignity, edification, and power to those of ecclesiastical history. Coincidence, it is said, may account for apparent miracles, as, *e.g.*, the healing of the centurion's servant, as recorded by SS. Matthew and Luke. But it is quite impossible to believe that such coincidences happened frequently in our Lord's life. Symbolism, too, has been turned to as accounting

for New Testament "miracles." This, again, might suit some of them, as, for instance, St. Peter's walk on the water to Christ, but could not apply to all.

It is time to note that the evidence for the New Testament miracles is perfectly good. Modern criticism has done much service by establishing the documents of the faith on a firmer basis. Harnack accepts approximately the traditional dates. All the New Testament writings, except, perhaps, Jude, 2 Peter, and James, must be considered to have been produced not later than the beginning of the second century. Of the four sources of the gospel record, St. Matthew was probably written between 60 and 70, St. Mark before 70, Q hardly much later than 60. The researches of Sir William Ramsay have shown the extreme accuracy of St. Luke as a historian. The fourth gospel is now admitted on all sides to have been in existence at the beginning of the second century. Dr. Headlam, in his able and suggestive book, "The Miracles of the New Testament," has truly remarked that the evidence of Papias about John the Presbyter would be treated with contempt if it were adduced in support of a traditional opinion, and the same writer observes that "we can find no evidence of a non-miraculous nucleus from which the miraculous element has grown, nor can we find in any New Testament historian, whose writings we possess, any attempt to exaggerate or invent miracles" (p. 220). It is argued that the evidence for the Virgin Birth is not so good as for the Resurrection. But Luke i. is quite complete, and there is no sufficient authority for omitting verses 34, 35, the latter of which is quoted by Justin Martyr. The article appears in the earliest form of the Creed (*circa*. 100), and was part of regular Church teaching from the beginning of the second century. There is no reference to the inaugural miracle of Christianity in the Acts or St. Paul's epistles because this did not form part of the apostles' preaching. The special direction of their witness was "to His resurrection" (Acts i. 22). The case is very different in regard to that miracle, the key-stone, as it is, of the Christian faith, and it is hard to see how any one can hold that St. Paul did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. How could the apostle remind Roman and Corinthian Christians of miracles which never happened? His reference to the Resurrection on the third day must surely imply that he knew of the empty tomb. Yet the Rev. J. M. Thompson has persuaded

himself that St. Paul "*believed in the Resurrection without believing in the empty tomb*"¹ ("Miracles in the New Testament," p. 172). This is apparently Mr. Thompson's own belief; yet he accepts the "miracle" of the *stigmata* of St. Francis of Assisi on the bare word of Brother Elias, St. Francis' Vicar, the body having been buried on the morning after death (pp. 219 ff.). The early dates of the New Testament writings assure us that their miracles were not myths, for myths require time for their creation. Here there was no long interval and so no growth. St. Paul's theology is as deep as St. John's. The miracles of the New Testament are very different in character from those of the Apocryphal Gospels which the Church carefully rejected. Supposed discrepancies in the various gospel histories are proof of their independence of each other. Or if the comparative lateness of the gospel narratives be insisted on, then, as Dr. Hitchcock has acutely remarked, this makes it all the more difficult for objectors to account for the early chapters of the history of the church, which on those objectors' view preceded the invention of the miracles—the chapters hardest of all to explain on merely naturalistic principles (see "The Present Controversy on the Gospel Miracles," S.P.C.K. p. 180). The fact is, the *onus probandi* lies on such objectors. They have not succeeded in their argument that since miracles are impossible, the miracles of the New Testament are incredible.

To conclude: To God there can be nothing miraculous or supernatural, but all is natural. It might well be that some, or many, or even all of the New Testament miracles were effected by means of laws of which we know little or nothing. Even though, in the advance of scientific knowledge, it might be possible one day apparently to reproduce or imitate some of these miracles, this would not detract from their miraculous character as far as their first witnesses and all succeeding generations are concerned. The miracles served and will serve their purpose of "signs," as St. John consistently calls them. Taking them, then, as having certainly happened, what is their further spiritual character or value to-day? For one thing, they throw into prominence the Fatherhood of God now greatly obscured by ideas of the Divine Immanence and Transcendence. For another, they may be considered as indicative of the restorative power of Christ in regard to the whole being of man. But the extent of such character

¹ The italics are Mr. Thompson's.

and value can hardly be stated in words more true and beautiful than those of Bishop Westcott in the work before cited. "With a voice of boundless authority and gentlest comfort," he says, "they tell us that the creative energy which we find not only in the first origin of things, but also in successive epochs, is not yet exhausted. They tell us that we are not bound up in a system which is eternal and unchangeable. They tell us that there is yet before us a noble transformation, a higher life. They tell us that the beginning of this is already made, and that it is ours to hasten the end" (p. 30). "I do not stop to inquire how far the *form* of miracles may change, as the world itself changes, but as far as miracles are flashes of a heavenly life and power bursting through the thin veil of natural life, as far as they are revelations of the invisible, Epiphanies of the Divine, they belong to all times" (pp. 45, 46). "A gospel without miracles would be, if I may use the image, like a church without sacraments. The outward pledge of the spiritual gift would be wanting. Teaching and example would remain, but faith would find no way opened to the world to come" (p. 36).

Objections to the miracles of the New Testament arise, it may be believed, greatly from the pride of human intellect and human knowledge. It is true that the Bishop of London in his preface to the recent edition of Bishop Westcott's book says, "Where we fail"—*i.e.*, in not readily accepting the miracles—"is not so much in weakness of faith as in poverty of *imagination*." Perhaps, with many, it is rather a lack of poverty of spirit, "humbleness of mind." All that the most learned know is as nothing in comparison with what there is to know. The great astronomer's description of himself and all his erudition was that of a child gathering shells on the shore of an infinite ocean. If men were more mindful of their ignorance, they would be stronger in faith and wider in spiritual knowledge. He who Wrought the miracles was the same Who said, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven, and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding and didst reveal them unto babes" (Matt. xi. 25).

MARCUS E. W. JOHNSON.

