

## ARTICLE VI.

## THE MIRACLES OF THE BIBLE.

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THE ordinary view as to the nature of the miracles of the Bible may be expressed as follows: God gives us a revelation of his truth and his will, and sends his Son Jesus Christ unto the world as the personal revelation, the Eternal Word, for the redemption and salvation of humanity. This revelation, however, and above all the person and work of Jesus Christ, had to be attested as genuine and truly divine, in order that it might be recognized and accepted as such, and in order that spurious revelations might be detected and exposed. As such attestations we have the miracles. Miracles, then, are such events in external nature or in history as cannot be wrought by natural forces or by human power, but only by the immediate efficiency or simple volition of God; and, being wrought by the immediate efficiency and simple volition of God, their purpose is to serve as the guarantee and voucher for the revelation which he has given, and to prove the divine mission of the prophets and teachers whom he sends, and, by inference, the truth of the doctrines which they teach in his name. But, although this view may be accepted as true to a certain extent, because the miracles undoubtedly served the purpose of gaining credence and confidence for the messengers whom God sent, yet in the ordinary treatment of this subject there is much that is unsatisfactory, because it is not based on a careful and thorough study of all the facts bearing upon the case. To state more clearly, therefore, and fully, than has been done

hitherto, the occasion, scope, and design of the miracle, is the aim of this paper.

1. *Negatively.*—There are reasons for believing that the ordinary statements as to the occasion and design of the miracle must be received with some modifications and limitations. Although it is true that Christ points to the works which he does as showing his divine commission and as intended to win adherence (Matt. xi. 3-5; John v. 20, 36; x. 25; xiv. 11, "Believe me for the very work's sake"), yet, when called upon by unbelieving hearers to perform a miracle or give a sign to prove his Messiahship, he refuses (Matt. xii. 38). A miracle cannot convert a man who will not believe the word of Christ or of the Scriptures. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead." (Luke xvi. 31.)

Again, we must remember that not every prophet of God, not every man who had a divine message to bring to his fellow-men, was endowed with this power of working miracles. Every prophet who speaks in the name of God and claims to have received a message from him without performing any miracles to prove such a claim is an argument precluding us from accepting the ordinary statements on the subject as a thoroughly satisfactory solution of the problem of the miracles.

Some writers, noting that the occurrence of the miracle is limited to certain periods, have attempted a somewhat modified solution. They maintain that the miracles for the most part occur only at those epochs when the divinity of Jehovah was to be signally demonstrated in contrast with heathen deities. Under Moses and Joshua this divinity and supremacy of Jehovah were to be demonstrated as against the imaginary gods of Egypt and Canaan. At the time of Ahab the conduct of the people of Israel was apostasy from Jehovah in a grosser form and more absolute sense than had ever existed or been attempted before; and if Israel was not

to be completely paganized and given over to one of the lowest and most corrupt forms of heathenism, it was necessary that something should be done to arrest the downward course of things and bring Israel back to their allegiance to the God of their fathers. And here, according to the view now under consideration, we have the explanation of the mission and miracles of Elijah. It was the mission of Elijah to be instrumental, chiefly through the miracles which he performed, in demonstrating the divinity and supremacy of Jehovah as against the worship of Baal, and so to call Israel back to their allegiance to the God of their fathers. But this view, also, is open to criticism. It is inadequate and erroneous in its statement of the nature of the mission of Elijah. I shall recur to this later on in the course of this paper. It is sufficient here to say that it could not have been the mission of Elijah to call Israel back to their allegiance to the God of their fathers, simply because, as a matter of fact, he did not so call them back. When God sends a man to do a certain work, he enables him to do it. We have also instances enough where the divinity of Jehovah was brought in contrast with heathen gods, and, humanly speaking, needed to be so demonstrated, without the occurrence of any miracles; as, for example, in the time of the judges, and in the case of Jonah; while the victories of the Assyrians over Israel would naturally be regarded by the Assyrians as the victories of their gods over the God of Israel. And in the case of the miracles of Christ, there is no apparent occasion to demonstrate the divinity of Jehovah as Israel's God in contrast with heathen deities. This view, therefore, is inadequate as a solution of the problem of miracles.

But to recur to the view first and chiefly under consideration, that miracles are given primarily because of their evidential value as proofs of the divine revelation, we must take into consideration the possibility of spurious miracles,

and we must note the fact that such spurious miracles are actually resorted to in order to bolster up a false and pretended revelation. In both the Old and the New Testament the people of God are warned that errors of doctrine and errors of life limit and even exclude the convincing force of the wonders wrought by evil teachers (Deut. xiii. 1 f.; Jer. xxviii. 9; Matt. vii. 15 f.; Matt. xxiv. 23-25). Such miracles were wrought by the Egyptian magicians at the time of Moses (Ex. vii. 11), and presumably by Simon Magus (Acts viii. 9-10). Whatever the real nature of such occurrences may have been,\* to the common people they had the appearance of true miracles. We may conclude, then, in the words of another writer, "that a miracle cannot—of itself, and considered apart from the character of him who works it, and of the truth which it is designed to teach—authenticate doctrine."<sup>1</sup>

But are we ready, because of these limitations, completely to reverse what may be called the ordinary view of the relation between miracle on the one hand, and revelation and doctrine on the other, and so exclude the evidential value of the miracle entirely? I think not; although there are those who do so. There are not a few who maintain that, instead of its being true that the main strength of the evidences of Christianity as a divine revelation so lies in its miracles that men believe in Christianity because they believe in the miracles, for them at least the exact opposite of this is true. They do not hesitate to affirm that they do not believe in Christianity because of the miracles, but rather they believe in the miracles, that is in their real occurrence and in their divine origin, because they believe in Christianity. But neither is this a tenable position. A miracle undoubtedly has evidential value. But it is not exhibited simply on account of this evidential value. It is not wrought simply to bear testimony to the truth of a certain revelation. In other

<sup>1</sup> Ladd's *Doctrine of Sacred Scripture*, Vol. i. p. 305.

words, it has this evidential value, not as an exterior attestation to revelation, but as an integral part of the revelation itself.

2. *Positively.*—To find the true nature, occasion, and scope of the miracle, and especially of the Christian miracle, we note, first of all, the remarkable fact that, in the Christian dispensation, true, undoubted miracles are found only in the beginning of that dispensation, and at the time of the founding of the Christian church and Christianity as a distinct, divine institution. We note, also, that those miracles which unquestionably stand at the head of all miracles, viz., the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the mission of the Holy Spirit, sustain the closest possible relations to this founding of Christianity. We may truly say that without these miracles no conception of Christianity is possible. We note, finally, that the other miracles of the Bible, the miracles of the Old Testament, are mainly clustered together in two groups, occurring respectively at the two most important points in the history of the covenant people,—the time of Moses and the time of Elijah. This fact, that the miracles of Scripture are found mainly in these three groups and occur at just those times,—the time of Moses, the time of Elijah, and the time of Christ,—has never been satisfactorily explained. Let us see what light can be thrown on these facts, and, from the facts, on the true nature, occasion, and scope of the miracle.

If we take the history of any living organism, say a plant, or an animal, we shall find a marked difference between the beginning of such an organism and its subsequent progress and development; and, generally speaking, this difference may be thus expressed: The subsequent progress and development can be explained by the operation of well-ascertained laws and forces of nature; the origin and beginning of that organism cannot be so explained. The same thing is true, not only of individual plants and animals, but

also of the principle of life itself. Given the vital principle or vital force to begin with, and our scientists, our biologists, will tell us all about its subsequent history and development. But how shall we account for its origin, for the beginning of this life? From the scientific point of view it is an insoluble mystery. From the religious point of view it is the manifestation and direct exertion of the creative power of God, who alone is the author of life.

In making this distinction, however, we must be careful not to fall into the error of the deists and deny the immanence of God. We have just as clear and unmistakable evidences of the power of God in the subsequent history of life, its continuance and preservation, as in its origin. It is not maintained that the origin of life is the product of the creative power of God, and hence dependent on him, while the subsequent history and development of this life are independent of him and carried on without his aid. But in the origin of life God works directly and immediately by the mere exercise of his divine creative power. In the subsequent maintenance of life, and in its propagation, he works through the use of means and by the operation and manifestations of vital forces and laws of nature which he has himself established. The origin of life is supernatural, and not the object of scientific study, and hence scientific study can make nothing of it. The further manifestations of life—its growth, its maintenance, and its propagation—are natural, and as such they come within the scope of scientific study and investigation.

Now let us apply this to the history of Christianity.

The whole of this history is, in a sense, divine and supernatural. Not in its origin alone, but along the whole course of its development,—in all its forms and manifestations, in all its progress, in all its conquests, individual, social, and national, together with much that is human, much that we must deplore,—we also have the tokens of the divine

power that alone is the source of its existence. In every conversion, in every hard and careless and rebellious heart that is softened and subdued, in every Christian character that is formed, in every item of Christian work that is accomplished, in every element of Christian experience that comes into the possession of the believer, we have the agency of the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of a divine power just as really and just as truly as in the miracles of the incarnation, resurrection, ascension, and mission of the Spirit. But this divine power has worked in different ways in different periods of this history. At present this power works only, so far as we know at least, through the use of means,—the means of grace, prayer, the word of God, the church, and the sacraments. We have no manifestation of that power which may be called in the true sense of the word “miraculous.” But it was not so at the beginning and in the founding of Christianity. Just as in the history of life in general, the beginning of that life is due solely to the direct creative act of God without the use of any means whatever, so too in the beginning and founding of Christianity we have the manifestation of the direct immediate power of God,—sometimes, it is true, acting through men, but acting in a manner independent of the ordinary laws and forces of nature, and so as to produce effects which are above and beyond them; and such manifestations of the power of God, when taking place in the external world and cognizable by the senses, we call miracles. The occasion, then, of the miracle lay in the nature and condition of the times, in the fact that in Christianity God was imparting a new vital spiritual force to the history of humanity. The occasion of the miracle lies not in its evidential value, but in the general principle—observed also in other departments—that in the beginning of life God works directly by the mere exercise of his creative power, whereas in its subsequent history he works just as truly, but through the use of means.

The starting-point of this view of the nature and occasion of the Christian miracle lies in the fact, noted above, that these miracles not only occur at the beginning of the history of Christianity as a distinct divine institution in point of time, but also, as in the incarnation, resurrection, ascension of Christ, and the descent of the Spirit, that they form most indispensable elements and perform most important parts in the founding of Christianity. We must not, it is true, wholly sever Christianity from the preceding economy. We cannot overlook nor deny the continuity of the church, beginning as it does with the call of Abraham, nor the continued validity of the one so-called Abrahamic covenant, which, though the sign has been changed from circumcision to baptism, is still the same covenant under which we are now living in this Christian dispensation. Still, Christianity is in a sense something distinct by itself, sufficiently different from the preceding economy, and sufficiently advanced in its nature, scope, and privileges, to warrant the statement just made, that in it God imparted a new, vital spiritual force to the history of humanity.

In proof of this position let us turn for a moment to the conversation which Jesus had with Nicodemus as recorded in St. John's Gospel, chapter iii. Nicodemus begins by admitting that to his mind the miracles of Jesus proved that he is a teacher sent from God. Jesus in his reply does not dwell on this at all, but proceeds at once to speak of the mystery of regeneration. Why is this? What is the connection between the words of Nicodemus and the reply of Jesus? We find it in the position which has been maintained in regard to miracles in general. We must interpret this reply as follows: "Nicodemus, you say that those miracles prove to you that I am a teacher sent from God. You must learn to see in them something more than this. They are the marks, concomitive and resultant, of the divine power as exercised by God, who is about to begin a new era



in the spiritual history of humanity. In the individual man the beginning of spiritual life, just like the beginning of physical life, is marked by a birth. This spiritual birth is due to the exertion of the direct creative act of the Spirit of God. Without that direct creative act, which is called regeneration, and without its immediate effect, which is called the new birth, this spiritual life is not possible. So now it is in the history of humanity. God is about to start a new era in the spiritual history of that humanity by founding the Christian church; and, like the beginning of spiritual life in the individual, like the beginning of the history of human life in its broadest sense, the beginning of this new era also must be through the direct exertion of the divine creative power without the use of means and in a manner independent of the ordinary laws and forces of nature."

So, then, we conclude that corresponding to the miracle of creation, and especially the creation of life at the beginning of the history of the world, corresponding to the supernatural origin of spiritual life in every individual who possesses that life by regeneration, we have the manifestation of immediate, divine creative power in the miracles performed by Christ and his apostles at the beginning of the history of Christianity, and especially in the four great central miracles which stand in such vital relations to the founding of Christianity, viz., the incarnation, resurrection, ascension, and mission of the Spirit.

Now the question is, What has been gained by this study of the miracle? What can be claimed as the results of this study? We have pointed out what seems to us an interesting and fruitful analogy. That is all. We have compared the history of Christianity with the history of physical life, its origin supernatural, its subsequent history natural. It is granted, an analogy is not an explanation. Far less is it an argument. It is only a suggestion. That is all that can be claimed for this presentation of the subject of mira-

cles. No explanation of the nature of miracles has been given. The suggested analogy is not of itself an argument for the correctness of this view of the miracles. But the attempt has been made to place the miracle as a factor in the development of God's kingdom on earth in its proper historical setting. Moreover, in recognizing this proper historical setting of the miracle, its evidential value need not be denied. That evidential value is conceded; but for our present purpose, for the study of the real occasion and scope of the miracle, it is of subordinate and incidental importance. Even when studying the teleological aspects of the miracle, we do it injustice if we limit the design of the miracle to giving evidence for the truth of revelation and the divine mission of a teacher sent from God. In that design the exhibition of relieving, redeeming, and saving love of God, the alleviation of the woes of humanity and the impartation of a divine blessing must also be included. But even with this extension the teleological aspect of the miracle can be, and generally has been, emphasized unduly when it is made the sole object of study and presentation. On this account it is the purpose of this present article, while recognizing the teleological aspect of the miracle, to place greater emphasis than has hitherto been so placed upon its historical and dynamic aspects. We have tried to combat the ordinary view that whenever God appointed a man to be his messenger and to speak in his name, he clothed or endowed him with the power of working miracles, in order to prove to men that this man was really sent by God, and consequently was speaking to them by divine revelation, and that this is the sole significance of the miracle. We have tried to show, not so much that the occurrence of the miracle is confined within narrow limits, for this is obvious to all who are familiar with Scripture history, but rather that such limitation of this peculiar manifestation of divine power is analogous to the same limitation observed in other spheres

of the divine activity, and that there may be some common ground or reason for such limitation in the nature of things or in divine appointment. According to this view the miracle simply marks a renewed impartation of divine creative energy and the beginning of a new, distinct era in the history of God's kingdom on earth.

We have four great epochs in the history of this kingdom connected with the four greatest names of that history—Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Christ. The church began to exist with the call of Abraham and the covenant promises made unto him and unto his seed. Until the time of Moses, however, the constitution of the church was patriarchal. A new era begins with Moses, when the family becomes a nation, and the constitution, from being patriarchal, becomes national. The third era begins with Elijah. Israel as a nation has apostatized from the true religion. It is true, these apostasies began as far back as the time of the judges, shortly after the death of Joshua. But, humanly speaking, God seemed loath to give them up, and tried again and again to reclaim them. Speaking anthropomorphically, we may say that it seemed to be God's original desire to have Israel as a nation love him and serve him and worship him. He wished to realize in Israel as a kingdom the idea of a theocratic kingdom, the kingdom of God upon earth, Jehovah the King, Israel the subjects. But with the repeated apostasies of Israel this idea had to be modified. And finally with the culmination of these apostasies under Ahab the idea of a theocratic kingdom to be realized in Israel had to be definitely abandoned. Israel as a nation had revolted against God and hence could no longer claim the covenant promises. The kingdom of God was not annulled, however. It simply took another shape. Instead of being realized in Israel as a whole, it was realized in the pious individuals of the nation, organized into a spiritual community. At the time of Elijah these pious individuals

numbered seven thousand souls. God reserved to himself these pious individuals that in their hearts he might reign supreme and so preserve and carry on his kingdom. With the life and work of Elijah we have the beginning of a sifting process which was designed to separate the false from the true, Israel after the flesh from Israel after the spirit. (Cf. Isa. x. 21, 22, "A remnant shall return." Matt. iii. 9 f.) This transition, therefore, in the idea of the theocratic kingdom, from the nation to the individual, when the nation as such ceased to be a theocratic nation and true communion with God was realized only in the individual soul and in the spiritual community, was marked by the appearance of Elijah and the miracles which he wrought. This is the significance of the life and work of Elijah, and not, as ordinarily stated, simply to call back Israel to their allegiance to the God of their fathers; for, as a matter of fact, they were not so called back. What Delitzsch says in another connection about the Servant of Jehovah (e. g. Isa. xlii. 1-13) may be cited here with a modified application: "The conception of the Servant of Jehovah is, as it were, a pyramid, of which the base is the people of Israel as a whole; the central part, Israel according to the Spirit; and the summit, the person of the Mediator of salvation who arises out of Israel." The conception of Israel according to the spirit, Israel as a collection and organization of pious individuals as distinct from the people of Israel as a whole, may be said to begin with the life and work of Elijah.

The last era begins with the Lord Jesus Christ. The transition from the nation to the individual had indeed been made and the idea of realizing the theocratic ideal in Israel as a nation had been definitely abandoned at the time of Elijah. Yet as a matter of fact these pious individuals, who had true communion with God, had always been Israelites. Hence arose the idea, consciously or unconsciously, that to be of the seed of Abraham after the flesh was still indis-

pensable for a share of the covenant blessings in him. Now, however, with the appearance of Christ, this was changed. What was confined to one nation is given to the whole world. The mystery which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel (Eph. iii. 5, 6).

The beginning of the first era is marked not by miracles, in the ordinary sense of the word, but by theophanies, which are closely allied to miracles. The beginnings of the second and third eras are marked by both theophanies and miracles. The beginning of the fourth era is marked by the miracles of Christ and his apostles.

The church is the manifestation of spiritual life from God as the author of life. He alone can give life to the dead. And to give life to the dead, to awaken and call the dead to life by divine creative power, that is the true miracle. Out of the dead world the church is called to life as a family under Abraham. Out of the dead family, that is, when Israel had ceased to have recognized and organized existence and had become a mass of slaves, the nation is called to life. Out of the dead, spiritually dead, nation the spiritual communion of Israel is called to life. Out of the dead form of Judaism the Christian church is called to life.

The attending individual miracles and theophanies of each period are not of supreme importance. They are but sparks from the anvil where God is forging his mighty works. The real miracle of the first period was the birth of the church herself. The real miracle of the second period was the birth of the nation. The real miracle of the third period was the birth of the spiritual community. The real miracle of the fourth period was the birth of the complete Christian religion and the appearance of Christ who is him-

self the supreme theophany, God manifest in the flesh, and the supreme miracle. Yes; he is indeed the miracle of miracles and superior to any of the miracles which he wrought. To his name be all the glory, world without end. Amen.