

ARTICLE II.

THE PLACE OF A MIRACLE.

BY THE REV. S. LEROY BLAKE, D.D.

THE place which a miracle occupies in the sacred narrative raises two questions: 1. What does a miracle prove? 2. What is its need?

1. *First*, then, let us ask what a miracle proves. Inasmuch as it is wrought by the intervention of divine power, it must prove the divinity of the system in whose interests it was wrought. It is a finger-mark of God which he left on the gospel when he passed it to us in Christ. It proves, also, that the power which works it is superior to all the laws of nature, and that these laws are obliged to bow to the will thus expressed.

A miracle also proves that the object for which it was wrought was good and worthy. Thus, before a wonder can be accepted as a miracle, the doctrine thus confirmed must commend itself to the conscience as good. Then the miracle seals the truth as divine. Thus miracles are the credentials of the bearer of the good word; signs that he has a special mission from God; proofs that he stands nearer to God than others, and that he is to be heard as himself the truth, or as a messenger standing in direct connection with him who is the truth (John xi. 42). So that all the miracles in the world could not compel assent of conscience to that which is not good. Miracles, so called, then become lies. And Paul tells us, that, even if an angel from heaven should bring another gospel, we are not to believe it (Gal. i. 8). It was right for Pharaoh to de-

mand of Moses a sign, for he came claiming to bring a message from God. It was the duty of Moses to make his claim good. On the other hand, Ahaz was charged with unbelief, because he would not ask for a miracle (Isa. vii. 10-13). For, that he cared nothing for the seal set to the words of Isaiah was sure evidence that he cared nothing for the promise which a miracle would have sealed.

The difference between mere tricks and real miracles may easily be seen. A miracle stands related to the highest moral ends; is always ethical. Mere tricks present no worthy end. Miracles are never wrought, in mere wantonness, for the sake of working them, but for some purpose which must commend itself to a good conscience; while the same cannot be said of mere thaumaturgic tricks. So that those who claim that the miracles of the Gospels are such tricks, of necessity cheapen the character, and weaken the force, of the narratives. A miracle cannot be in itself a merely futile act, issuing in nothing which is worthy.

Origen when he was plied with the alleged miracles of heathen sages, insisted upon this difference in character between them and the miracles of the Holy Scriptures. Thus he says, in reply to Celsus: "Let the Greeks show to us, among those who have been enumerated, any one whose deeds have been marked by a utility and splendor extending to after generations, and which have been so great as to produce a belief in the fables which represented them as of divine origin. . . . The whole habitable world contains evidence of the works of Jesus, in the existence of those churches of God which have been founded through him by those who have been converted from the practice of innumerable sins."¹ Again, speaking of a comparison of the miracles of Jesus with works of magic, he says: "There would indeed be a resemblance between them, if

¹ Against Celsus, Bk. i. chap. 67.

Jesus, like the dealers in magical arts, had performed his works only for show; but now there is not a single juggler who, by means of his proceedings, invites his spectators to reform their manners, or trains those to the fear of God who are amazed at what they see, nor who tries to persuade them so to live as men who are to be justified by God."¹ But Christ, by his miracles, did seek this very end. So that they are lifted, in character, far above magic arts, which are wrought for no end higher than themselves. The miracles of Moses issued in the Jewish polity; the tricks of the Egyptian jugglers issued in nothing. The miracles of Christ issued in the Christian church, and whole nations have been knit together through their help. But what have magic arts to show?

Thus the miracles in the gospel prove its ethical and worthy character. Being a fruit of Christ's power, they incorporate the word of salvation in an act of salvation. They are glimpses of the great redemptive work which he came to accomplish. They are his credentials that he came for a worthy end, with the sanction of God. They were pledges of a power which could with authority forgive sin. Thus when he was charged with blasphemy, because he said to the sick of the palsy (Matt. ix. 2), "Thy sins be forgiven thee," he replied, 'that you may know that I have power to forgive sins, I will work a miracle, and command the sick of the palsy to arise.' That is, he said, I will prove my power to do the greater act, which is less obvious to you, by doing the lesser act, which appeals to your senses, and is therefore more convincing (Matt. ix. 1-6). Thus the miracles of the New Testament stand forth, not only as proofs of the unrivaled power of Jesus, but also of his unapproachable gentleness and love; since his works of superhuman power were such as not to crush men with a sense of the presence of omnip-

¹ Against Celsus, Bk. i. chap. 68.

otence, but were such as to impress them with a sense of his boundless sympathy and compassion. Constant drafts were made upon his heart. The deepest and tenderest emotions of his nature were constantly called into play. The absence of these works of power and of love from the Gospel narratives would be a most serious loss in precisely this direction. We believe more profoundly that God so loved the world, because that Son whom he sent to die for it proved that love by so many wonderful exhibitions of his power and compassion.

Of course a miracle is not possible without a personal God, and a created universe within whose laws the wonder may be wrought. Therefore miracles are proofs that there is a personal God, immanent in and ruling over the universe. Dr. Behrends is right when he says, "God is immanent in the life of the world. Theism granted, and miracles are possible." I should add, and inevitable to a finite mind, "while the resurrection of Jesus Christ blocks the path of every man who ventures upon their universal rejection." If there be such a personal God, he can operate whenever and however he pleases, upon the universe which he has created. Nor would it be possible for any one to deny a miracle on the ground that it violates a constant experience. For a constant experience proves nothing, except what we are accustomed to; proves nothing as to the fact of God's will in some exceptional case; proves nothing as to what natural phenomena may appear. For no man's experience can lay claim to be universal, nor to be so conversant with the will of God as to define exactly what it is to be in a given case. Nor can any man's experience be conclusive against a fact established by the experience of multitudes of eye-witnesses. Nor can the experience of one age be urged to decide what the experience of the next age must be. Up to the time of Watt and Morse, millions could have testified that the universal ex-

perience of men was that trains were not drawn by steam, nor messages sent by electricity. But the experience of men since is quite the contrary. So the experience and observation of men testified to the miracles of Christ, nor can their testimony be impeached, except by proving that they did not tell the truth, or that they were practiced upon by the arts of a magician, or of a juggler. But this cannot be done. For the works of Jesus all go to prove that he practiced no such deception. They all bore testimony to his unwearied efforts to do men good. About the close of the second century, Origen wrote, "The name of Jesus can still remove distractions from the minds of men, and expel demons, and also take away diseases; and produce a marvelous meekness of spirit and complete change of the character."¹ Then we have one set of experiences testifying to the train of cars drawn by steam, and the message sent by electricity, and another set of earlier experiences testifying against them. Will those who assert the infallible argument of experience risk their argument by laying their necks on the rail just in front of the fast express which is thundering along at the top of its speed? Why, then, must the experience of Hume, and Huxley, and Spencer, and a host, be urged as decisive against the testimony both of eye-witnesses, and the works themselves, every one of which was for the sole end of the good of men! "In their anxiety to get rid of the Divine and Superhuman element of the gospel," rationalists "are driven into conjectures and hypotheses more improbable than the miracles which they deny."² The miracles are in the Gospel narratives. They are uniformly associated with acts of sympathy and compassion for the sorrowing, the suffering, the penitent, the needy. Thus the majestic miracles, together with that character which commands the admiration of the ages, to-

¹ Against Celsus, Bk. i. chap. 67.

² *Ecce Deus-Homo* (Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1868), p. 20.

gether with that teaching which was so startling, so awful, so tender, together with that death agony encircled with such a halo of moral glory, together with that empty tomb, and the unrivaled splendor of the risen one, point to the eternal power of our Lord himself, and declare, in words of an almost audible voice, this is the incarnate love of God, who was more than man, and was in the beginning with God, and was God.¹

Before passing to the second question, we cannot forbear enforcing this argument from miracles with another consideration. The extreme school of the so-called "higher criticism" has eliminated from the Gospels everything which bears in the least upon the supernatural; thus following the lead of Strauss and Renan. What is left after they are through with the Gospels retains little to arouse interest. And yet the question will force itself to the lips, 'how is it that this hero of a baseless legend, this impotent and fallible Christ of the "higher criticism," could become the founder of the Christian church, which has survived the assaults of its enemies, and more deadly internal dissensions and noxious impurities, for nearly nineteen hundred years?' The difficulty of accounting for the phenomena presented by the Christian church on the suppositions of the extreme school of the "higher criticism" is far graver than to accept the Gospel teachings as to the supernatural. Indeed, the difficulty is so grave that Renan was obliged to ascribe some faint semblance of divinity to our Lord, and admit that he at least believed that he wrought miracles.² It is much more satisfactory to accept the miracles as proof that God's hand was concerned in producing the Gospels, and that the plan there unfolded was devised in the divine mind and heart. Thus miracles may be accepted as emphasizing the declaration that "God so loved the world, that he gave

¹ Liddon's *Bampton Lectures*, p. 146.

² *Bampton Lectures*, p. 147.

his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

2. Our second question is, What is the need of miracles? John Foster said that "a miracle is the ringing of the great bell of the universe, in order to summon men to listen to the sermon." If the miracle accomplished no more, it arrested men's attention and turned it to the truth. And since a miracle is wrought only by God, and as a seal to that which is good, it must have the effect to confirm an unprejudiced mind in belief of the truth. It may be said that Christ was himself sufficient justification of his claims, and that we need no miracles to lead us to believe in the historic Christ. But on the event of his baptism, at the threshold of his ministry, God added the testimony of his audible voice, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." So some may say that the gospel is its own proof. But not to every mind. Men still say, as did Pharaoh to Moses, "Show a miracle for you." Only recently Mr. Huxley has demanded miracles in proof of the claims of Christianity. Certainly they must have been a necessity to an age which expected religious revelations to be supported by miraculous proofs. This expectation that a divine system will be attended by miraculous phenomena seems to point out that the miracles of the New Testament were suitable to the truth, and were a natural accompaniment of its introduction. They point the gospel out as different and apart from all other truth. Says Dr. Dick, "But the miracles of Christianity must have awakened all the attention of mankind, because they decided, if true, the most important question upon which the human mind can fix its anxiety."¹ Again, Dr. Dick says, "Miracles may be said to have been the great proofs of revelation to the first ages, who saw them performed."² To say that they were not a necessity to the

¹ Theology, Vol. i. p. 74. ² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

system which God was revealing to men, is to question his wisdom, or doubt the revelation, inasmuch as they attended upon its being given to men. Only an atheist could doubt the possibility of miracles. To an enlightened believer in God, the laws of the universe must appear to be nothing but the exertion of his power. Surely the mode of the operation of his power he could change for an end worthy of his wisdom, and do no damage to the universe. In order to demonstrate to men that a revelation is from God and authoritative, it might be necessary to some minds that he should attend the giving of it with such visible proof of the supremacy of his will over natural law, as a miracle would be. Christ seems to me to have pointed to this necessity, and recognized it when he healed the paralytic as a demonstration of his power and right to forgive sins. This view is held by Dr. Dick, who says, "that a case may be conceived in which there would be a reason for the working of miracles, and that is the case in which they are alleged to have been actually wrought." "Now if God should be pleased to make a revelation for the instruction and happiness of his creatures, miracles were evidently necessary, because it was only by them that it could be attested. . . . Here, then, is a case in which miracles were called for to confirm the testimony of the ministers of heaven, to convince others that they spoke by higher authority than their own. . . . They [revelation and miracles] are inseparably connected, the one could not be without the other."¹

Miracles, since they are the interference of divine power with the usual working of the laws of the created universe, causing results in nature which otherwise would not take place, are visible proof that the power and will of God are present in the created universe through these laws in their ordinary working. For only the power which created

¹Theology, Vol. i. p. 73.

these laws, and works through them, could so interfere as in a miracle. And the power which does so interfere, must be the power whose governing will these laws express in their ordinary working. So "miracles were signs of the presence of God [that this was the view of Nicodemus, see John iii. 2] with those who exhibited these seals, as they have been called, by which their commission to communicate his will was attested. . . . Those who witnessed the supernatural works by which the law of Moses and the gospel of Christ were confirmed, were furnished with the means of being as fully assured that the revelations proceeded from God, as if they had heard him pronounce them with an audible voice; and we, to whom their testimony to the works has been faithfully transmitted, may have equal confidence in the divinity of these revelations."¹ This view is confirmed by the fact, already pointed out, that Christ rested his claim to be believed upon his miracles: "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me, or else believe me for the very works' sake" (John xiv. 11); "The works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me" (John v. 36). Can anything be plainer, than that Christ here brought forward his miracles to testify to his divine authority? Can it then, in the face of these words of Jesus, be claimed that miracles were not necessary in the biographies of our Lord? Not without invalidating the whole record.

It must also be borne in mind that the miracles of the Bible were chiefly performed in the presence of bitter enemies, who would not admit their reality unless compelled to do so. The magicians of Egypt, it will be remembered, were forced to confess that the wonders which Moses wrought were of God, and utterly beyond them (Ex. viii.

¹Theology, Vol. i. pp. 75, 76.

19). So the chief priests and rulers were obliged to confess that a notable miracle had been wrought by Peter and John (Acts iv. 16). They accepted it as a sign of the divine authority of the preaching of these disciples, and thought to prevent the spread of the gospel, thus divinely attested, by silencing the preachers. So, in the words of Dr. Pond, "the great end of miracles, obviously, was to attest the divine mission of those who performed them, and the divine authority of the revelations which they were instructed to deliver."¹ The object of the miracles wrought by the apostles was for the same end: "They went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following" (Mark xvi. 20). After Peter and John had been commanded to speak no more in the name of Jesus (Acts iv. 18), they went to the company of disciples, and they all prayed, "Grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus" (Acts iv. 29, 30). The record states that this prayer was answered. When the apostleship of Paul was called in question, he vindicated it by appealing to his miracles. "Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you, in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds" (2 Cor. xii. 12). The miracle of Elijah in raising the widow's son drew from her this confession, "By this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth" (1 Kings xvii. 24).

We do not misinterpret the Scriptures, then, when we say that miracles were designed to attest the divine mission of those who wrought them, and the divine authority of their communications, and thus to establish the faith of those who heard, and of those who should become acquainted with their words and works. That this result

¹ Christian Theology, p. 87.

followed from the miracles cannot be denied. Their presence in the narrative, accomplishing this result, affords strong presumption that they were necessary to this end. Even Trench, who cannot be accused of unduly pressing the argument from miracles, says that "the miracles are to be the credentials for the bearer of that good word, signs that he has a special mission for the realization of the purposes of God in regard to humanity."¹

The miracles of Jesus would seem to be historical facts which admit of no doubt. There were too many eye-witnesses who would have detected and exposed a fraud. But the question forces itself upon the mind, why he devoted so much time to activities of this kind, which might have been given to teaching, if they occupied no important place in his mission? "For it is evident from the report of our Gospels, that, as Ewald has it, the working of miracles was almost to the end of his life, 'his every-day task.'"² It is no assumption to say that they were not simply a spontaneous effect of his sympathy with human misery, but were necessarily attendant upon his office as Saviour. "His miracles belong to his office as Saviour. Otherwise he would not have cured some blind people and some lepers, raised three persons from the dead, etc.; he would have destroyed all blindness, all leprosy, death itself, forever."³ For only so could spontaneous sympathy have satisfied itself. "For what purpose, then, were the miracles wrought? Jesus calls them signs; and so they were,—eternal manifestations, destined to make the weaker spirits understand the moral work he had come to accomplish in the race. As his teaching was a miracle in words, so his miracles were a teaching in acts. . . . Thus miracles serve not to produce faith in carnal hearts, but to make manifest to souls disposed to believe, or already believing,

¹ Miracles, p. 28. ² Godet in Schaff-Herzog, Vol. ii. p. 1523.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1524.

the riches of the treasures which have been offered them in the person of Jesus."¹

The religion of Jesus Christ involves a mystery, as Paul frequently declares.² Our Lord himself told his disciples that the kingdom which he had come to set up, was a kingdom of mysteries (Mark iv. 11). Then we say, as Professor Park remarks, that miracles were appropriate to a religious system, which was itself a miracle. They were appropriate to the truth which Jesus came to announce. They were needed as signs and seals of the message and the messenger of God. The world had a right to demand of one professing to come to them from God, that he show his credentials, before being believed. Therefore Dr. Channing was not wrong when he said that miracles are a primary and essential attribute of the religion of Christ. "For Christianity is not only confirmed by miracles, but is in itself, in its very essence, a miraculous religion."³ No human mind could have gathered it, in the ordinary use of its powers, from the ordinary course of nature. It was wholly extraordinary both in its character and in its manifestations to men. It was entirely different from anything which had gone before it, or which came after it. Its doctrines claim for it the distinction of being a supernatural provision for the recovery of the race. It no more, therefore, could have come without miracles, than the ascending sun could shine without shedding light and warmth around. They were a necessity to the gospel, because they were an essential attribute of its character; belonged to it, as one mystery may belong to another.

Again, to quote Dr. Channing once more,⁴ "the great purpose of God . . . in establishing the order of nature

¹ Godet in Schaff-Herzog, Vol. ii. p. 1524.

² See Rom. xi. 25; xvi. 25; Eph. i. 3-12; vi. 19; Col. i. 26, 27; ii. 2; iv. 3; 1 Tim. iii. 16.

³ Works (Boston and New York, 1848), Vol. iii. p. 106. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

is, to form and advance the mind; and if the case should occur, in which the interests of the mind could be best advanced by departing from this order, or by miraculous agency, then the great purpose of creation, the great end of its laws and regularity, would demand such departure; and miracles, instead of warring against, would concur with nature." He goes on to say that the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, to give men light on subjects of deepest concern to them—the doctrines of God, of life, and of immortality—was just such a case. Miracles were needed to arrest men's attention to these great fundamental truths and to show them (1) that God had deeper regard for them, than for the regular routine of his material laws, (2) and that his care extended even to individuals.

Without stopping here to discuss Renan's theory of miracles, we may note that he admits their necessity. They were expected of Christ. "It was the received opinion that the Messiah would perform many. . . . Jesus had therefore to choose between two alternatives, either to renounce his mission, or to become a wonder-worker."¹ It is not saying too much, that if he had offered to men a system without a miracle, he not only would not have been believed in his own day, but also would have been rejected by the very critics who now cast aside the Gospels because they contain supernatural narrations. It is true, then, that Jesus had to choose between two alternatives; either to work miracles, or assure the defeat of his mission from the start. "In a general sense, it is therefore true to say that Jesus was a miracle-worker, and an exorcist only in spite of himself. . . . The miracles of Jesus were a violence done him by his time, a concession which the *necessity* of the hour wrung from him."² The only point at which I am at all in harmony with these views is, that miracles were a necessity to the system which Jesus came to establish. The

¹ *Life of Jesus*, p. 230. ² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

need of them lay in the unique character of the gospel message. "They were demanded by the state of the world which preceded them, and they have left deep traces on all subsequent ages." They belonged to the introduction of the gospel-message, as oxygen belongs to the air to give it life-giving properties. The gospel without miracles would be like the air without oxygen. With Trench, we say, "We should greatly miss them if they did not appear in sacred history, if we could not point to them there; for they belong to the very idea of a Redeemer, which would remain most incomplete without them." They confirm the sum total of the impression which the divine revelation was intended to make on us.