

Some Considerations on the Rev. J. M. Thompson's Book, "Miracles in the New Testament."

BY THE REV. J. A. HARRISS, M.A.,
Vicar of St. Andrew's, Oxford.

AT an early stage of his book Mr. Thompson lays down certain conditions which should, he thinks, be observed in an inquiry into the nature and reality of New Testament miracles. *A priori* considerations as to the impossibility of miracles, or of finding evidence to prove them, are to be excluded. On the other hand, *a priori* considerations in favour of miracles must not be allowed to introduce any bias in weighing the evidence; they also must be ignored. That is the attitude that he claims to adopt in conducting his study.

It is natural to ask whether the author has succeeded in observing these conditions; and a further question suggests itself: whether it is really possible for an inquiry of this nature to be carried on without *a priori* considerations of some sort.

It will, perhaps, throw some light upon these questions if we examine briefly the definition of a miracle with which Mr. Thompson prefaces his inquiry. That definition describes a miracle, in the first place, as "a marvellous event occurring within human experience, which cannot have been brought about by human power or by the operation of any natural agency, and must therefore be ascribed to the special intervention of the Deity or of some supernatural being." This is followed by a further clause describing a miracle as "chiefly an act (*e.g.*, of healing) exhibiting control over the laws of Nature, and serving as evidence that the agent is either Divine or is specially favoured by God."

It is only fair to say that Mr. Thompson is not responsible for the form in which this definition is expressed. It is taken from Murray's Dictionary, and is used as a starting-point of the discussion; but, at the same time, the author puts it forward as

embodying the view of those who regard miracles as being due to supernatural agency.

I venture to think that there are many who, while holding to that view, would hesitate to accept this statement as satisfactory. The first half of the definition, reduced to its simplest terms, asserts that the cause of a miracle is to be found, not in man or Nature, but in God or in the sphere of the supernatural. If we consider for a moment the conception that lies behind this, we see that man and Nature on the one hand, and God on the other, are regarded as separate and distinct from one another. They are viewed practically as antithetical; the activities of the one are independent of, and apart from, those of the other; the possibility of the movements of the Divine combining with, working through, and becoming part of those of man and Nature is not contemplated. Here, on the one side, is "human power" and "natural agency" as one possible sphere of causation; here, on the other, is "the special intervention of the Deity" as another. Is it not obvious that the mind which devised this definition regarded the world of phenomena, including all human history and human life, as a world with which, at any rate ordinarily, God had nothing to do; and if anything at all, then it was of the nature of a "special intervention"? It suggests the work of a Deist who would represent the world as created indeed by God, but then left to go on its way without Him, except on rare and special occasions. It seems to know nothing of God's permanent presence and power in the world, working in and with and behind the things seen. It is difficult to imagine that Mr. Thompson can really believe that this fairly or adequately represents the conclusions of Christian thought to-day, with its strong hold upon the principle of Divine Immanence, in regard to the nature of a miracle.

But, further, a definition, if it is to be of any use, ought to furnish a standard by which the matter under consideration can be judged. Of what use to this end, it may be asked, is the definition here given? The test it suggests must, from the nature of things, fail in its application. At first sight, perhaps, it

may appear to provide a good working principle. If any event can be proved to be due to human or natural agency it is not a miracle; and, conversely, if it cannot be so proved, then it is a miracle, and must be ascribed to God. But how is that proof to be given? In order to apply the test adequately a complete knowledge of all that constitutes natural and human activity is required. If it is to be determined, therefore, whether this or that particular event occurring within human experience is or is not of the nature of a miracle, the whole course of Nature's workings and the whole range of human actions must first have been thoroughly explored; the causes which produce all their observed effects, the limits which define all their remotest possibilities, must necessarily have been accurately calculated and determined, as a qualification for a fitting judgment. But is our knowledge of causation so complete that we can deliver that judgment? What scientist or philosopher would be bold enough to say that he knows perfectly well what Nature and human thought and volition are capable of producing? Even if he thinks that he now knows sufficiently well the ways and movements of physical phenomena to justify him in speaking of the uniformity of Nature, yet he must admit that there are unexplored secrets that still evade his scrutiny, and the question of causation is confessedly a debatable ground; and even if one side of man's complex being can be studied and classed among the phenomena and subject to the laws of the physical world, yet the spiritual side of his nature, his capacities of thought and consciousness and determination, are so subtle and mysterious that they are always suggesting to us wider and greater wonders and possibilities of energy and life in the future. The utmost that we can do, therefore, in this direction is to judge according to our present knowledge of Nature and humanity; but then, how extremely circumscribed and imperfect that present knowledge is! The test cannot be regarded, therefore, as final. At the best the process of reasoning and the proof offered can only be tentative. The last word—whether the cause of the event rests with natural or human agency or

with God—which is the very thing we want to get at, is left to conjecture. And hence at the end of the process we find ourselves just at that point where, if we are to move on farther towards anything approaching to personal conviction, some presupposition is almost inevitable. A man will throw into one or other of the evenly balanced scales the weight of something—call it what you will, an impression, a tendency of mind, a persuasion, a hope—that comes from his own personality and is purely subjective, and the scale will accordingly go down on this or that side. But that "something" is in reality a presupposition. This, of course, would apply to any definition that might be framed of such a subject. Mr. Thompson, in his notes upon the definition, appears, if I understand him aright, to concede that this is the case; for he points out, in effect, that we are restricted to two possible ways of explaining a miracle: either it is viewed in the light of an exception to Reality as understood by natural science and formulated in the laws of Nature, and must then be "due to the special intrusion of a supernatural agency," or it is viewed as an event which, while being imperfectly understood at present, will ultimately be found to be no exception, but capable of explanation in terms of human or natural agency. Those are the two divergent views—the view, we may say broadly, of the religious mind in the one case, and of the critical mind in the other. But the view is, after all, in either case a theory, a guess—the one expressive of a certain faith in supernatural agency, the other no less a certain belief in the laws of Nature. Both are presuppositions. And Mr. Thompson leaves us in no sort of doubt as to which view he personally favours. To his mind "the original events were not miraculous"; and later on in his book he frankly avows that he thinks Christianity would be better off if freed from the miraculous features altogether. This is an attitude of mind which cannot be said to be the outcome of an unbiassed study of the literary and historical evidence. It is an attitude which points clearly to the presence of a bias already possessing the mind while dealing with the evidence.

It wants the evidence to show in one particular direction. But if that is so, then what has become of the restrictions which he laid down for the inquiry that there should be no *a priori* considerations? He has committed himself to one most radical presupposition before starting. The truth is that Mr. Thompson has, if he will pardon the writer for saying so, made a mistake in method. If he really wished to conduct his inquiry without any prior assumptions for or against, and to base his conclusions strictly upon the evidence available, he should have left out altogether this definition and his own slight treatment of the questions which it raises. As it is, it only confuses the issue at stake. If, on the other hand, holding, as he unquestionably does, to start with, the conviction that miracles are, if not impossible, at least highly improbable and certainly undesirable, he should have left out that misleading reference to the exclusion of *a priori* assumptions, and should have given more fully the reasons that would justify his own position, as well as some consideration to the claims of the other side.

It is not difficult to trace the influence of this preconception in the treatment of the evidence throughout Mr. Thompson's book. As an example, let us consider the method in which the evidence of St. Paul's letters is dealt with. This is considered under three headings—evidence bearing upon (1) the miracles of the Gospels, (2) upon miracles in the early Church, and (3) St. Paul's own claim to work miracles.

In regard to the first point, it is said that there is practically no evidence at all. St. Paul makes no references whatever to our Lord's miracles; and, indeed, with the exception of the Eucharist, the Death and Resurrection of Christ, he ignores the earthly ministry altogether.

Mr. Thompson is unquestionably right in saying that throughout St. Paul's Epistles there is an absence of any reference to the Gospel miracles. The explanation of this is to be found in the generally recognized fact, to which Mr. Thompson refers, that St. Paul's own spiritual experience had made the Person of Christ, crucified, risen, and exalted, the centre of

his conception of Christianity ; and in the light of this central truth the details of our Lord's earthly ministry were of subordinate interest to him. This does not, however, prove that he knew nothing about them, or considered them of no account. The purpose that St. Paul had before him in penning his Epistles was not one that would specially call for any mention of this feature. The evidential purpose that our Lord's miracles served should be remembered. It is clear from the Gospels that they were aids to faith to those who were immediately associated with Him in the ministry and saw His works. Their value as credentials was limited to the circle of those who witnessed them, and naturally they would carry less conviction as evidences of our Lord's Divinity to those who only heard about them, but did not see for themselves. Viewed from the evidential point of view, our Lord's miracles helped to confirm the faith of His followers and keep them together as a united body until the greater and more convincing evidence to His Divine Sonship supplied by the Resurrection to an extent superseded the former. - And, further, we have to remember that miracles were being wrought within the Christian Church itself during the Apostolic period ; and there was, therefore, the less need for its teachers to refer back to the former miracles of the Gospels, since that particular form of evidence was available in the supernatural manifestations going on in their midst. But while there are these reasons why no special references to the Gospel miracles should occur in St. Paul's letters, that does not warrant the conclusion that the Christ of history was nothing to him. There are, as is well known, several expressions scattered through the Epistles which almost certainly presuppose an acquaintance on the Apostle's part with our Lord's life and teaching as recorded in the Gospels. At least some knowledge of His birth and family position underlies the words " born of the seed of David " (Rom. i. 3), " born of a woman, born under the law " (Gal. iv. 4). It is difficult to imagine that St. Paul could write, " I entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I who in your presence am lowly among you "

(2 Cor. x. 1), without some acquaintance with our Lord's words in St. Matt. xi. 29, “I am meek and lowly in heart”—not only because the language is similar in the two passages, but still more because the thought of our Lord's character appealing to men by reason of its meekness is common to both. St. Paul elsewhere speaks of “the words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. vi. 3) as evidently well known; of the Lord having given a definite charge on the subject of married life (1 Cor. vii. 10), where the teaching embodied in St. Matt. v. 32 and xix. 3-10 may be referred to; of the Lord having left instructions as to the support of the preachers of the Gospel (1 Cor. ix. 14), which suggests the charge to the Twelve or to the Seventy in St. Matt. x. 10 and St. Luke x. 7.

Again, Rom. xii. 14 and 17, where St. Paul urges the duty of returning good for evil: “Bless them that persecute you: bless, and curse not. . . . Render to no man evil for evil”; and 1 Cor. iv. 12, where he says of himself, “Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure,” show a striking resemblance to the teaching given in St. Luke vi. 28—“Bless them that curse you.” And the manner in which St. Paul expounds the duty of loving one's neighbour as being the fulfilment of the law, in Rom. xiii. 8-10; and the emphasis upon the need of bearing one another's burdens, because by so doing the law of Christ will find its complete fulfilment, in Gal. vi. 2, suggest a very real dependence upon some well-known utterance of our Lord upon the same subject, such as we find reproduced in St. Mark xii. 31 and parallel passages. As a last illustration we may notice the use which St. Paul makes of the metaphor of the steward's office in 1 Cor. iv. 1 *f.*, recalling so vividly the parabolic teaching in St. Luke xii. 42 *f.*, and showing a resemblance to it not only in the phraseology, but in the general idea of a trust imposed and a consequent responsibility to the Master, who will demand at His return an account of the stewardship. These allusions are sufficiently frequent to make us hesitate before saying off-hand that the Christ of history was comparatively nothing to St. Paul.

A careful student would feel even still greater hesitation before endorsing Mr. Thompson's sweeping generalization that the early Church shared in this indifference. St. Peter's speeches, he says, in the Acts show this. But he must surely have forgotten the words in Acts ii. 22 and in x. 38. In the one St. Peter is reported to have said: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs, which God did by Him in the midst of you, even as ye yourselves know"; and in the other, "Who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil." These alone show that St. Peter not only knew and preached of the earthly ministry generally, but also of the miracles of our Lord specially, as important and striking proofs to those who witnessed them of the Divine character of Christ's mission.

(To be concluded.)

