

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

(Concluded.)

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LET us turn now to the second and third sections of this chapter, which deal with the evidence furnished by St. Paul's letters on the supernatural powers exercised in the early Church and by the Apostle himself.

It is a little difficult to follow Mr. Thompson's treatment here. I am anxious not to misunderstand or to misrepresent his meaning, but the difficulty is to get at his exact meaning. A certain assumption meets us here again and again: it is that whatever words St. Paul may use of these wonderful events, they are to be understood in every instance as referring exclusively to works of healing or exorcism. No matter how full and comprehensive the phrase may be, and no matter how the words themselves may differ by which the Apostle endeavours to express his conviction of God's presence and power in the Church, yet the solution is always ready at hand and always the same. The words only mean faith-healing in some form, and that is an example of natural law and not of miracle. Mr. Thompson seems at times to admit that such events were due to the workings of God's Spirit, and that St. Paul himself was convinced that they were so. I suppose he might say that they were Divine acts, and yet, at the same time, were due to natural causes. If he mean that God was manifesting Himself in a special and unique manner, and yet was doing so by natural agencies that seemed then and now to be abnormal because not in accordance with ordinary experience, but none the less really according to law, then many would be disposed to agree with his explanation as being possible, if not certain. But if he mean by using the expression

"natural law" to exclude the Divine action, and to say that the Apostle was mistaken in attributing the events to God, then he can hardly wonder if Christian opinion condemns him. Certainly his language is ambiguous, and the general impression conveyed by his treatment of the subject is to the effect that he wishes to reduce the phenomena as a whole to the level of ordinary occurrences.

But, however that may be, the method by which he arrives at his conclusions in these two sections is open to criticism.

The interest turns mainly upon the meaning of the words in 1 Cor. xii. 10, 28, 29, "workings of miracles" (*ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων*), and "miracles" (*δυνάμεις*), following on the phrase "gifts of healings" (*χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων*), by which St. Paul describes two of the forms among the many diversities of the Spirit's workings in the Church. The sense of the latter phrase is obvious. In order to ascertain the exact meaning of the other, "workings of miracles," Mr. Thompson suggests a study of the use of the word *δυνάμεις* in the New Testament, and directs attention especially to its use in Acts xix. 11. The conclusion at which he arrives is that "where *δυνάμεις* is explicitly shown," it means the healing of disease or the exorcism of evil spirits; and it is, he argues, therefore natural to suppose that St. Paul only means different degrees of the same kind when he calls them by different names; and so, as the final result—unless faith-cures are miracles, a possibility that has been already excluded—St. Paul never claims miraculous powers for the Church. Similarly, after discussing the passages (2 Cor. xii. 12, Rom. xv. 18, 19, etc.) that bear upon the Apostle's claim to supernatural powers, the conclusion is reached that the language only covers faith-healing and exorcism, which are instances of natural law, not miracles; and upon all this the hypothesis is reared that the nearer we get to first-hand witness, the weaker becomes the evidence for miracles.

If the leading commentaries be consulted as to the precise meaning of the two phrases in 1 Cor. xii. 9, 10, and the exact difference implied by them, it will be at once seen how great

a variety of opinions exists among scholars upon the matter. But it will also be found that there is a substantial agreement among them that the two clauses do mean different things; and naturally so, if the general sense of the whole passage be taken into account. For St. Paul is there enumerating the gifts exercised by the members of the Church, and he is emphasizing especially two things—the real unity lying behind all these various gifts, because they all flow from the one Holy Spirit, and their no less real difference as seen in the varied character of the gifts and of the men who exercise them. If that is so, the presumption surely is that when the Apostle says "to another gifts of healing," "to another workings of miracles," he has in his mind a real difference of kind between the two things, and not "different degrees of the same kind."

But let us examine afresh the New Testament use of *δυνάμεις* in relation to supernatural powers. We find that in three instances (Heb. ii. 4; 2 Cor. xii. 12; Acts ii. 22) it occurs in conjunction with the words *σημεία* and *τέρατα*. In each case the three terms are intended to express, in one comprehensive phrase, the whole range of supernatural manifestations. In the first, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of God bearing witness with the first generation of Christian preachers to our Lord's message by signs and wonders and by manifold powers. In the second, St. Paul tells the Corinthians that his Apostleship was proved to them by signs and wonders and mighty works. In the third, St. Peter, addressing the men of Israel, says that Jesus of Nazareth was approved by God unto them by mighty works and wonders and signs. Clearly in these three instances *δυνάμεις* are not defined or described as being any one particular form of miracle. The term, together with the other two, points to a broad and general conception of the miraculous.

In one case (Acts viii. 13) *δυνάμεις* occurs with *σημεία* only, without *τέρατα*; and again, as in the above instances, the phrase is quite general. It points to the supernatural accompaniments

of Philip's work in Samaria. There is nothing in the passage to show what is explicitly meant by the word.

In other instances of its use—1 Cor. xii. 10, 28; Gal. iii. 5; Acts xix. 11; St. Matt. vii. 22, xi. 20 (= St. Luke x. 13), xiii. 54, 58 (= St. Mark vi. 2, 5), xiv. 2 (= St. Mark vi. 14); and St. Luke xix. 37—the word *δυνάμεις* occurs alone. In regard to five of these eight examples it will be found to stand for exactly what the combination of the two or three terms in the former instances expressed—viz., supernatural works generally, without specifying their nature. In the remaining three (Acts xix. 11; 1 Cor. xii. 10, 28; St. Matt. vii. 22) the context certainly suggests something as to what the word may possibly refer. But it only suggests: it does not define specifically what. In Acts xix. 11 the word is used of specially remarkable works wrought by God through St. Paul's agency at Ephesus, and the narrative goes on to say that, as a result, sick men were healed and evil spirits cast out. It may fairly be argued that *δυνάμεις* here points to and includes these two forms of supernatural energy—healing and exorcism. In St. Matt. vii. 22 our Lord speaks of certain people coming to Him "in that day," and saying that they have prophesied by His Name, and by His Name cast out devils, and by His Name done many mighty works—*δυνάμεις*. What meaning is to be attached to the word here? All that we can with certainty say is that it appears to express something other than prophesying and casting out devils. In 1 Cor. xii. 10 the meaning of *δυνάμεις* is, as we have seen, in itself vague and uncertain, and the context enables us to say nothing more than that it must mean something different from "gifts of healing."

That is practically all the available evidence. We have taken the twelve instances of the use of the word in the New Testament, and we have found that in nine of them *δυνάμεις* is used in a broad, undefined sense of miracles in general. In one of them (Acts xix. 11) it may mean works of healing and exorcism. In one of them (St. Matt. vii. 22) the sense is uncertain as to what the *δυνάμεις* are, and the context only helps us to form the negative conclusion that it does not appear to mean

exorcism. And then, when we come to the one remaining instance of the use of *δυνάμεις* (1 Cor. xii. 10), where the precise meaning is just as doubtful in reality as in practically all the others, Mr. Thompson tells us that if we consider the use of the word in the New Testament we shall come to the conclusion that where *δυνάμεις* is explicitly shown it means the healing of disease or exorcism, although it is altogether doubtful whether it is so explicitly shown; and even if we make an exception in the case of Acts xix. 11, which, he says, is significant in its bearing upon the interpretation of 1 Cor. xii. 10, it is the one and only example of the supposed explicit demonstration, and it gives a meaning which is, after all, a wider one than the word in this passage from the Corinthian letter is able to bear. It is by such methods that he finds what he wants to find in St. Paul's words, and then proceeds straightway, on the strength of that quite unwarranted inference, to dismiss the whole strange and perplexing phenomena of the supernatural in the life of the early Church and in St. Paul's own experience as non-miraculous. As a further illustration of method we may consider briefly one special point in Mr. Thompson's treatment of Q.

Q is the symbol "which has established itself," to quote Sir John Hawkins' words, "as a convenient designation of the second documentary source (our Gospel of St. Mark being substantially the first) which Mt. and Lk. are now generally thought to have had before them, and from which they both drew materials for their respective compilations" ("Studies in the Synoptic Problem," p. 97). It consists mainly of the sayings of our Lord, in contrast to the Gospel of St. Mark, in which events are specially emphasized; but it is supposed to comprise also some connecting incidents to serve as a setting for the sayings. Among those incidents are the narratives of two of our Lord's miracles, the healing of the centurion's servant and the casting out of the dumb demoniac, and also the narrative of the Temptation.

In discussing the two miracles, Mr. Thompson dismisses the first as being probably a mere coincidence, and the second as

one only of a large class of exorcisms, and therefore not, in his view, a miracle at all.

The Temptation he treats simply as a vision, and therefore not miraculous. It is this last point that calls for a word of comment. Our Lord's Temptation may, perhaps, have assumed the form of a series of visions, but even so, that does not touch its real significance. Whatever its form, it must be regarded as corresponding to and recording a true experience through which our Lord passed, and from its very nature it is difficult to conceive that it could have come originally from any other source than our Lord Himself. A vision in itself may not be miraculous, but if in an account of a vision the chief actor concerned is shown to possess miraculous powers, then we have to consider, not whether the vision itself may or may not be a miracle, but whether the claim of the person to work miracles is justified or not. That is the point which Mr. Thompson omits to discuss. And clearly the Temptation of our Lord turns upon that. The problem presented by the narrative is whether our Lord will or will not use a certain unique power, which He is assumed to possess—*e.g.*, of turning stones into bread—on His own behalf. The claim here suggested is not, be it noticed, a claim to do acts of healing or to exorcise spirits, which, on Mr. Thompson's assumption, are not really miracles, but rather to work a marvel of a kind that would definitely come under the category of Nature-miracles—the class, *i.e.*, which distinctly involves a breach of the ordinary laws of Nature, and is, in the true sense of the word, miraculous. Now, this narrative of the Temptation forms part of Q, and we have, therefore, in this the earliest, or one of the earliest possible sources of the Gospel, a fragment of evidence for our Lord's claim to miraculous powers of peculiar and special importance. For it not only presupposes that the Evangelists believed our Lord to be capable of working miracles, and that the narrative, to quote Sir John Hawkins' words, "would be unmeaning to those who did not regard Jesus as possessing miraculous powers" ("Studies in the Synoptic Problem," p. 129), but it carries us to a stage farther back. It

presupposes that the disciples believed this because our Lord had taught them to believe it of Him, and that He also claimed that power for Himself. And yet, in spite of the manifest importance of the evidence here, Mr. Thompson dismisses it with the slight notice that it "cannot be regarded as miraculous," and arrives at the conclusion that Q "contains no evidence for miracles."

The truth is that the miraculous element is so integral a part of the original conception of our Lord's Person, and so closely interwoven into the whole texture of the Gospel sources, that it is an impossible task to construct a consistent picture of His life and ministry if that element be eliminated; and it is not unjust to Mr. Thompson's book to say that one can only eliminate that element by either neglecting or doing violence to the evidence. It is the presence in his mind of a marked adverse preconception that has led him to do less than justice to himself, to his own abilities, and to his subject. Further examples of his method might be given from other parts of his book with like results. Again and again it will be observed that where the evidence fairly weighed leaves the matter open so that no one absolute and certain decision either for or against is justified, there the preconception is seen at work, disturbing the state of poise and casting its deciding vote, so to speak, in favour of the negative conclusion. It is this radical fault that spoils the book all through, and makes it an untrustworthy guide. It presents a great array of facts and figures. It marshals and analyzes them with an impressive show of critical skill and method. It appears to the unsuspecting reader to be conducting the inquiry with all the knowledge and care of a trained, discriminating mind. It claims to base its conclusions upon a fair, unprejudiced review of all the available evidence; but all the while, behind this impressive array, there is nevertheless that subtle bias already anticipating and influencing the conclusions in one particular direction. The book is the work rather of an advocate than of a judge.

Doubtless, in due course, it will be estimated by competent

students at its right and proper value, and we can safely leave it to them to judge how far it has made any permanent contribution to our store of knowledge; but in the meantime it cannot but be regretted that by its hasty judgments the book should needlessly prejudice the cause of New Testament criticism in the eyes of many devout but uncritical Church-people. A comparison naturally suggests itself between Mr. Thompson's work and the recently published volume of essays, "Studies in the Synoptic Problem," both in regard to the method and temper of mind in which each has been written, and in regard to the results arrived at by each. No one will venture to say that the latter is one whit less exact in its application of the critical spirit or less fearless in its readiness to abide by the results than the former. But the results of the one are largely negative and destructive, while those of the "Studies" tend to strengthen conviction in the reality of the great historic facts that underlie the Gospels. It would be difficult to say of Mr. Thompson's book what was said in a recent review of the other: "If all New Testament studies were prosecuted with the same cautious methods, the same fearless and open-minded, yet reverent, spirit, as those in this volume, Christianity would have nothing to fear and everything to gain from the advance of criticism."

