

The Credibility of Christian Miracles.

I AM proposing in this paper to deal solely with the miracles of the New Testament, and mainly with that of the Resurrection of Christ. If we wish to prove that miracles are credible, it is enough if we are able to show that the miracle of the Resurrection is a fact. On it stood the Church as founded by the Apostles; with its truth to-day stands or falls the credibility and possibility of miracles generally. If it once be accepted that the miracle of the Resurrection was possible and is a fact, the acceptance of the fact of any miracle rests solely on the sufficiency of the evidence adduced in favour of it.

What is a miracle? Of many definitions, the following taken from Hastings' "Dictionary of the Bible" seems to give the clearest answer: "A miracle may be described as an event manifesting purpose, occurring in the physical world, which cannot be accounted for by any of its known forces, and which therefore we ascribe to a spiritual cause." It will be seen from this definition that a miracle is not merely something wonderful. Matthew Arnold in his "Literature and Dogma" lost sight of this when, in arguing against miracles, he said: "Suppose that I could change this pen with which I write into a pen-wiper, I should not thus make what I write the truer or the more convincing." What we are arguing for is not the power of doing conjuring tricks.

Nor is it merely for the existence of supernatural power that we are arguing. It is true that the acceptance of the miraculous demands the acceptance of the supernatural; but the fact of something being the result of supernatural power will not necessarily make it convincing as a miracle. As the author of "Ecce Homo" says: "That a man possesses a strange power that I cannot understand is no reason why I should receive his words as Divine oracles of truth. . . . His power may terrify, but it will not convince." No, while the miracles of Christ, *qua* miracles, could not possibly be accounted for by any known

forces of human power, the main point about them was the purpose they displayed. They were, as I hope to point out later on, not separate nor separable from the other facts of His life; as Origen said long ago, "the miracles of Christ all bear the impress of His own holiness, and He ever used them as means of winning to the cause of goodness those who witnessed them."

There are, I take it, two main objections that people raise against miracles: the fact that they seem to break through the law of continuity in Nature, and the fact that they are contrary to experience. But before proceeding to answer these objections in detail, there are one or two preliminary observations to make. At the root of all objections there lies the denial of the possibility of the supernatural. To a certain class of professed scientists the world of Nature is merely a machine, which being self-constituted and self-started at some remote period of the past, must pursue its movements uninterrupted, till the course of time brings its defective parts into collision, to result in reducing the whole to chaos or annihilation. This reduces man also to a machine, or rather to a fractional part of the great machine. He has no power of independent action or of individual thought; he is merely impelled by the vast treadmill of the universe to perform a certain number of revolutions, after which he drops into the dust-heap of eternity.

Now, man will not accept this position for himself; he is conscious that he is not the mechanical material form that he appears on the surface. He is conscious that he is a spirit; he has, or rather is, an underlying consciousness, an ego, which directs all his outward actions. But though he demands this for himself, he often refuses to acknowledge the spiritual—*i.e.*, what we call the supernatural in Nature. Thus when critics like Renan or Strauss deny the miraculous Christ, their arguments, though often most captivating to the superficial thinker, are fraught with difficulty. Let us take their two positions. Both start with the postulate that the supernatural is impossible. Renan feels forced to grant that the historical gospels are true.

Christ lived here on earth about nineteen hundred years ago ; He was killed by the Romans ; and then His followers, in order to support their establishment of the new Church, invented the tale that He had risen from the dead, and moreover adorned His life with many picturesque colourings of miracle. The miracle part must be an addition, since all miracle is impossible. This position, beside begging the question, is really untenable. Apart from the miraculous Christ there is no historical Christ. To quote some words of the Bishop of London : “Go back to the earliest accounts of Him, analyze if you can the Gospels into the one central account that underlies them, and the one most certain fact about Him is that He worked miracles. He worked miracles if He did anything. Do you want to take His teaching by itself? It is embedded in miracles. Do you want the discourse on the Bread of Life? It is founded on the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. The liberal teaching about the Sabbath? It is occasioned by a miracle on that day. Will you keep Him as the great Philanthropist or the Inspirer of Hospitals? They were inspired by His miracles and works of healing. The non-miraculous Christ is the fiction of the brain of the nineteenth century.” If we take the position of treating the Gospels as nothing more than historical documents—and from the point of view of criticism this is a justifiable position to take—we must yet be careful to treat them as no less, and the historical evidence for the miraculous in the Gospels is overwhelming. Suppose we take the greatest of all the New Testament miracles. If a man will once give up the dogmatic assertion that all miracles are *a priori* impossible, the evidence for it is as great, if not greater, than that for any fact in history.

It was a canon of miracles laid down by Hume that “no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless that testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood is more miraculous than the fact it endeavours to establish.” It is just this that is claimed for the miracle of the Resurrection.

If it is not a fact, it is impossible to imagine how a body of

timid and ignorant fishermen from Galilee, who at the approach of danger to their Master all forsook Him and fled, could, in the course of a few weeks after His death, have begun a process of turning the world upside down, which has continued with increasing vigour to this day.

If it was not a fact that there was an empty tomb, the surest way of putting a stop to this new and hated religious movement was for the chief priests and scribes to have produced the body. This was never attempted.

If it was not a fact, how are we to account for the fact that over five hundred men and women believed that they had seen the Lord together? The sceptic says that they were mentally inclined to believe—that the wish was father to the thought; nothing could be further from the truth. Whatever the Apostles were, it is admitted that they were men of honesty; they all, at least, believed the truth of what they described. They would not have gone to prison and to death unless they had done so. Moreover, men of their intellectual capacity could not have invented the story of the Resurrection—at least, Renan says that they were “men without invention and without genius.” Their account is that the disciples were so struck down with terror by their calamity that they refused to believe in the Resurrection. They certainly did not expect to see their Risen Master. And, more than this, a subjective vision has never been known to have come to several people at one time, nor several times to the same collected people. They were the last people to expect the Resurrection, they were the last people to have been able to invent the story; and had they invented the story, we are left with the assumption that the greatest event in the world's history—the event with most lasting results for the benefit of mankind—was founded on ignorance and perpetuated by a lie. That the Christian Church was founded in this way is a fact that is more difficult of belief than the miracle which this explanation seeks to disprove.

To turn now to the position formulated by Strauss, a position held very widely till recent times, but now rendered

impossible owing to modern scholarship. He, like Renan, demands the impossibility of the supernatural; but, unlike Renan, sees that the historical and the supernatural are impossible to separate in the narrative handed down to us. The historical, then, must go. Jesus is a myth—*i.e.*, Jesus, as we know Him in the Gospels, represents the accumulated growth of fable that appeared in the second century of our era, purporting to be the life of a good man who lived in the first century. Even if, as Strauss averred, the Gospels were the product of the second century, this theory allows very little time for the myth to have grown up. The miraculous myth only grows up round men who are only seen through the mists of antiquity, not round one who lived but a hundred years ago. But to-day no competent scholar dates the Synoptic Gospels later than the third quarter of the first century. The myth hypothesis is eliminated. Unless the writers were badly informed or were dishonest, their writings may reasonably be considered as historical. To demand that they were ill-informed is unscientific, considering the fact that the events described took place under the eyes of the writers or of their near companions. That they were dishonest, as we have seen from the character of the men and the example of their lives, as well as from the ingenuousness of their record, is in the highest degree improbable. The historical part of the narrative cannot be separated from the miraculous. We have, therefore, very good grounds for accepting the miraculous in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

After all, the main miracle is not the power possessed by Christ of healing the sick or of raising the dead, nor even the final display of power in His own triumph over death, but in the miracle of the spotless life—the life of perfect communion with the Father. That Christ had power to lead such a life, as cannot be denied—no man has ever been able to pick a hole in His character—proves that He lived in a higher spiritual plane than ordinary man. It is therefore only to be expected that He would have possessed higher powers in the spiritual

sphere than ordinary man—in other words, that He wrought miracles.

To the Christian there is no difficulty in believing that Christ worked miracles, because to him Christ is what He represented Himself to be—the Son of God, “equal to the Father, as touching His Godhead.” That God should work miracles is a claim in which we see nothing impossible nor incredible. J. S. Mill admitted that if there be a God, there is no difficulty in believing in miracles. We believe in a God Who has appeared on earth, and to us the statement that He worked miracles on earth is neither irrational nor absurd.

But to revert to the objection that a miracle, even worked by God, is impossible because it necessitates an interruption in the law of Nature or because it is contrary to experience. These two will be found to merge into one. The mere expression “laws of Nature” presupposes the existence of a lawgiver who can at will change His law, if need be, to work out His design. The law of continuity, for example, is nothing more than a convenient principle for the direction of scientific investigation. That the expression is inadequate to express the rule of Nature is evident from the fact of creation. Even if we do not demand the literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis, it is evident that we cannot conceive of the absence of a beginning of creation, whether it be of the earth as such or of the germ of protoplasm which was to develop into the universe as we see it now. That beginning necessitates an interruption in continuity, so that this very postulate of science is untenable, except as a working hypothesis for the investigation of natural phenomena.

Again, it is very easy to talk of the uniformity of Nature as an objection to miracles, especially for people who know little of science and less of God; but it must be remembered that Nature, as Huxley said, “is the sum of the phenomena presented to our experience, the totality of events past, present, and to come, of which the so-called miracle forms a part.” In other words, an *a priori* objection to a miracle is unsound. It

must be accepted or rejected on evidence." "If a dead man did come to life, the fact would be evident, not that a law of Nature had been violated, but that the laws of Nature, even when they express the result of a very long and uniform experience, are to be held only as grounds of a more or less justifiable expectation." Every day our experience is being widened, so that an event which twenty years ago would certainly have been considered contrary to Nature and contrary to experience is now accepted as a fact. As our knowledge increases, much that would until lately have been thought miraculous is seen to conform to laws higher than our previous experience dreamed of.

But if we admit that a law of Nature is a law until some law higher than itself has been made known to experience, we must yet allow that God, if we ascribe a miracle to Him in the past, has at least seemed to break natural laws, because the higher laws were not known to mankind at the time the miracle was performed. Might it not seem, then, that this action of God was due to mere caprice? Were it so, our idea of a just God would indeed receive a sad shock. The fact is that man, as we thought above, has a will of his own, whether he likes it or no; and by bringing that will into conflict with the Divine will he has necessitated a constant readjustment of the existing state of things by the Creator. Had man not sinned, and by his sin upset the fair order of God's earth, there would have been no need for Divine interference in a perfect state of things. The fact that God has interfered from time to time on earth only points to the fact that God is not merely an engineer who has constructed a locomotive, opened the throttle, and let her go where she will, whether the signals be green or red, but one who is constantly on the footplate to regulate the machinery and to safeguard the lives of the passengers. When things go on as usual, it seems as if the steam were working by a natural law; but when the master eye sees danger ahead, and sees fit to interfere, who is the individual crank, shut up in the complex machinery of the whole, that it should object to the engineer's interference?

The true miracle, as we thought, is always performed with a purpose—the purpose of revealing God to man. Now, since a supernatural God can only be revealed by supernatural means, and since it is only reasonable to suppose that if God has created beings for communion with Himself, He should reveal Himself to them, we must suppose a supernatural revelation ; in other words, a miracle. I venture to think that the revelation which may come to a man to-day in time of suffering or crisis is as supernatural and miraculous as came in Christ's healing of the sick and suffering ; each method is suited to its time. In His days that which we commonly call a miracle was demanded as a proof of the Divine ; to-day such an occurrence would produce far less conviction than the Divine voice of conscience in the heart.

When all is said and done, we still need to remember that the day is coming when we shall see that miracles *do not exist*. "Miracle" is only a term to express certain Divine phenomena in human language. With God there is no miracle ; or, if you like, everything is miracle. To revert to our former definition, we must, in the case of God, omit the words, "which cannot be ascribed to any known causes" ; and we are left with the definition, "A miracle is an event manifesting purpose, occurring in the physical world, which we ascribe to a spiritual cause." If we admit the existence of God, we must allow that He knows the forces at His command. Once the forces are known, their action is easy to comprehend. If a child is told that a bar of iron can be cut as easily as a pat of butter, he may believe, but he cannot understand ; it may be a miracle to him. When once he is old enough to understand the uses of the forge and the hydraulic chisel, all is easy to accept ; the known forces are changed. So one day when we have left school, and are able to pursue our studies at the University, we possibly shall be able to understand that much that seemed to us miraculous has, after all, been done according to higher laws, which include, and perhaps repeal, those laws with which we have been familiar.

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