

Miracle and the New Testament.

I.

IT will hardly be denied that the theological problem which has come most to the front of late years is the problem of miracles. Other subjects of controversy have fallen comparatively into the background, and yielded place to the question of the miraculous in connexion with many of the incidents of the New Testament. "The one great obstacle to the reconciliation of contemporary intellect with faith" was the way in which the Bishop of Oxford characterized "miracles" at the Middlesbro' Church Congress in 1912. Another important and authoritative pronouncement was that of the Upper House of the Canterbury Convocation two years later, which declared with regard to modernism that the denial of any of the historical facts stated in the Creeds goes beyond the limits of legitimate interpretation. There is even more opposition, and growing opposition, to-day to the miracles of the gospels than ever before. One reason for this lies, of course, in the unprecedented progress of scientific research in recent years, although, or rather, perhaps, because we live in the days of wireless telegraphy and telephony and the mysterious emanations of radium. One very practical evil effect of such scepticism has been seen in the complete abandonment of public worship by many whom the question of the miraculous has made agnostic. Modern times have indeed witnessed a vast change in the attitude of men towards Biblical miracles. It was not till after Augustine's time that these were regarded as remote or strange events which no longer happened. Similar occurrences, especially the expulsion of demons and supernatural healings, are spoken of by Tertullian, Justin and Origen as still happening. In fact not only during the patristic period but even right on to and through the Middle Ages, people, for the most part, could not conceive a world without miracles. But since the seventeenth century a continuous alteration has taken place in regard to this subject. Spinoza was the first definitely and deliberately to attack miracles. His *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* was published anonymously in 1670, and his argument is that God's nature, existence and providence cannot be known from miracles, but can be learned from the fixed and immutable order of nature. He assumes his premises and gives

no reason for their truth, and the line of his argument destroys the possibility of freedom in any form. The Deism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries denied divine providence and the possibility of revealed religion. Thus arose a rigid separation between God and nature. Hume, in his "Enquiry concerning the Human Understanding" contends that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature," and, as the evidence in favour of those laws is greater than that for any miracle, denies that there has ever been sufficient testimony to establish the reality of one. Butler and Paley are the two best known English apologists of that day. The former points out that there can be no *à priori* grounds for not accepting miracles considering the wide extent of what we do not know in nature. During the nineteenth century there arose in Germany—the *sons et origo* of many other evil things since—all the developments of rationalism. Dr. Paulus, of Heidelberg, considering that the gospel writers were deceived by ignorance of second causes, accounts for miracles on natural grounds. Sick persons were healed by the application of oil, demoniacs were calmed by sedatives, Christ did not really die. The first modern critic to attack our Lord's life in the spirit of entire disbelief was Strauss in his "Life of Jesus," published in 1835. He aimed at the total destruction of the miraculous, and sought his end by mythical solutions which no longer have any value. Harnack's position is a moderate one. It is that miracles are produced by forces of nature of which we know little or nothing.

Surveying the arguments which have been brought forward by the foregoing and other writers, it becomes possible to classify the reasons on account of which miracles are alleged to be impossible. First, it is said, miracles are impossible because, if they could happen, they would be contrary to nature; again miracles are impossible because inconsistent with the universal reign of law, or God's method of working; and, once more, because they are opposed to all human knowledge and experience. Let us examine these assertions in order.

1. *Miracles are contrary to nature.* It is at once manifest that here everything depends upon what is meant by nature. Augustine long ago saw that we have no possible right to include under the term "nature" anything more than the natural facts or laws with which man is acquainted. *Portentum fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura.* Modern writers follow in his steps.

“ The valuable element,” says Professor Wendland, “ in Augustine’s discussion of miracle is the principle that when we speak of ‘ natural and supernatural ’ we are making a purely subjective distinction ; for God what we call ‘ natural ’ process and what we call miraculous are equally natural. If it is proposed to take as a mark of miracles that they could be accounted for by natural causes, Augustine would add that neither can we assign any ground why ordinary facts in nature are exactly as we find them to be. As an example he points out that we can assign no reason why fig seeds are so small ” (“ Miracles of Christianity.” Eng. Trans., p. 57). Nature is in fact not a closed system confronting God and unalterable by man, but open to the influences of man’s spirit, and controlled by God. At the same time, knowledge of the whole of nature, or the whole cosmic process, is as impossible for us as for the ancients. A truly philosophical view of the relation of miracle to nature was outlined by the Rev. Robert Vaughan in the *Church Quarterly Review* in 1910 (Vol. xx. April, p. 117). “ Miracle,” he says, “ is a revelation of the latent possibility of things—of what they can become by divine activity within them. The whole of nature is by its creation so constituted that it can according to its very *nature* become what it is not in itself. It has a capacity to receive what it does not contain, and the isolated miracles of Christ in particular are to reveal this capacity. Such changes are not from the thing as it is in itself, and therefore not properly products of ‘ nature,’ nor are they contradictions of the natural—for things of nature are created with a fitness for such transformation and evolution, but they are supra-natural by virtue of a communication to their nature of a fresh activity from their source.”

2. *Miracles are impossible because of the universal reign of law or God’s method of working.* Now what do we really mean by “ law ” ? Again, no more than a certain process or order of things as we know it. The uniformity of the laws of nature means merely that like causes produce like effects. We have no proof even that everything which happens in nature is inevitable. It is not certain even from the point of view of nature that the sun will rise to-morrow, it is certain only that the sun will do so as long as circumstances remain as they are to-day. We are absolutely ignorant of the manner in which many startling changes in the world occurred, as, for instance, how life came into being, how water came to be, how man came

to exist. There is analogical reason for believing that other remarkable events, such as we term "miracles," may have happened at particular times in the history of our race. It may well be questioned—as indeed it has been—whether we are at all justified in carrying over to the domain of Divine government such a conception of law as is valid for our finite experience. For we cannot draw the distinction that in miracle God is immediately working, and at other times leaving it to established laws to work. That were to take but a mechanical view of the universe. On this supposition God becomes merely a spectator of the cosmic process He has inaugurated. His interest or want of interest in what happens makes no difference at all to its happening. But only that emerges which was put into the process by God's eternal ordinance. This was the conclusion arrived at by the Stoics, and Stoicism as revised by Spinoza and modern Determinism has added no single thought or argument. The truth is otherwise: we can see how in the case of sickness, for instance, different possibilities are always or very often open. As Archbishop Trench has said, "The clock-maker makes his clock and leaves it; the ship-builder builds and launches his ship which others navigate; but the world is no curious piece of mechanism which its Maker constructs and then dismisses it from His hands, only from time to time reviewing and repairing it. . . . Laws of God exist only for us. It is a will of God for Himself . . . it is a will on which we can securely count . . . still from moment to moment it is a will" ("Notes on the Miracles," pp. 10, 11. Eleventh Edition Revised). For the strict and proper meaning of the term "law" we must look to the Old Testament. There the word means an ordinance or command of God. There are demonstrably causes and forces other than physical. Wherever men exert their free wills, the moral and spiritual intervene in the physical system. The "law" of gravitation is suspended if I lift my hand. Now if man can effect such intervention without interfering with the ordinary course of natural law, how much more can God!

3. But *miracles are alleged to be impossible because experience and scientific knowledge can allow them no place.* Yet Huxley said, "We can never be in a position to set bounds to the possibilities of nature" ("Science and Christian Tradition," p. 198, Ed. 194), and again, "denying the possibility of miracles seems to me quite as unjustifiable as speculative atheism" (*Spectator*. Feb. 10, 1866). But

is it at all legitimate to characterize miracles as "impossible"? There is, of course, such a thing as a scientific impossibility, as, for instance, to assert that two and two make five, or that the angles of a triangle make three right angles. There is also a *logical* impossibility, as to speak of a round square. But a miracle is neither one nor other of these. It may be *contrary* to experience, but is not *contradictory* of it; may be above reason, but is not opposed to it; conflicts not with our reason but with our expectation. Miracles may have been wrought by the Divine will by the use of laws of which we know nothing or could not employ if we knew them. The fact is science is not in a position to deny or to affirm as to the possibility of a miracle. How much might our Lord have been able to do by means of that mysterious "semi-material and semi-spiritual fluid, intangible and imponderable," which we call the ether! To-day, indeed, science can no longer deny that there exists evidence for the power of mind over body, the existence of a supersensible world, or even the possibility of communication between such a world and our own. Bishop Dolbear in his "Matter, Ether and Motion" (S.P.C.K. 1899, p. 354) wrote, "Physical phenomena sometimes take place when all the physical antecedents are absent . . . the subject matter of thought is directly transferable from one mind to another. . . . If such things be true, they are of more importance to philosophy than the whole body of physical knowledge we now have, and of vast importance to humanity, for it gives to religion corroborative testimony of the real existence of possibilities for which it has always contended. The antecedent improbabilities of such occurrences as have been called miracles, which were very great because they were plainly incompatible with the commonly held theory of matter and its forces, have been removed, and their antecedent probabilities greatly strengthened by this new knowledge." There are, too, other miracles than physical. There are the miracles of prayer. When God gives something in answer to prayer which He would not have given had He not been asked we have a special kind of action differing from the normal course of things, which is the conception of miracle. There are miracles of providence, when events explicable by natural causes occur at a precisely appropriate time, such, *e.g.*, as the plagues of Egypt. There are such spiritual miracles as sudden conversion, by which a man's whole belief, estimate of things and way of life are

completely altered ; as fellowship with God, as spiritual strength or power, confidence or resignation. Can we hold that God can introduce new elements into the spiritual life and not into the physical? There can be no contrasted dualism between nature and spirit. The whole world is under Divine influence. We may conclude generally, then, that on many grounds miracles are far from being impossible.

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(To be continued.)

