

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE TEN BEST BOOKS ON MIRACLE.

It is perhaps worth observing at the start that when we describe a book as "good," we may intend either of two different things, the difference between which is apt to be overlooked. In the first place, we may, and in the majority of cases do, mean that the book commends itself to us as an able and more or less convincing and satisfactory treatment of its subject; either it confirms the views of the subject we had held before perusal, deepening our belief in their soundness, or it has persuaded us to change our views and to adopt new ones. Anyhow, the book is one with which we agree. Or we may call the book "good" because in our judgment it contains a powerful and lucid statement of theories which we regard as mistaken, but which it is for the advantage of everybody should be expounded in their most impressive form. Both usages appear to me legitimate, and I shall try not to forget them in the succeeding pages.

The argument *against* miracle, in the modern period, tends to swing between two points, any particular volume usually giving more prominence to one of the two interests, though occasionally both may be stressed. On the one hand, there is the intrinsic impossibility of miracle; on the other, the lack of sufficient evidence for belief. The first has been classically treated by Spinoza, the second by Hume. If we wish to know the case against miracle at its strongest, their presentations of it are the best.

Spinoza's argument is contained in Chapter VI. of his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, published in 1670. The permanently formidable part of what he has written there does not consist in his rejection of the idea that God's existence is shown most clearly of all by breaches of natural law, or even his contention that "many things are narrated

in Scripture as miracles of which the causes could easily be explained by reference to ascertained workings of nature"; for various Christian thinkers during the last fifty years have inclined to agree with him. He is also right in protesting against the common scholastic idea that the power of God and the power of nature are quite separate things—than which there could be no more unbiblical idea. What chiefly counts in Spinoza's argument is his pantheistic identification of the order of nature and the will or providence of God. "By the government of God," are his words, "I understand the fixed and unalterable order of nature or the connexion of natural things." The general laws of nature are "nothing but God's eternal decrees," and from the Divine decrees everything follows with an absolute and mathematical necessity. It is easy to recognise here a general view which has become axiomatic for some types of modern intelligence. Causality, a category of the mind, has been deified and put in charge of all existence, life, and history. God and the uniformity of being are but two names for one thing, the inside and outside of the same fabric. What actually happens is a perfect expression of the Divine nature. The *moral* faith in God to which alone the conception of miracle as Christians construe it is relevant, the conviction that He is Father as well as Upholder of the world, is here totally ignored and has nothing to say. But the mechanical determinism which forms the starting-point of so many present-day arguments about the supernatural has never been stated in principle with greater force, one had almost said sublimity, than by Spinoza.

Hume accepted this deterministic axiom in his famous essay "On Miracles." "A miracle," he says, "is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument

from experience can possibly be imagined." Plainly enough the phrase "*unalterable* experience" is an assumption of the very point to be proved; and it is doubtful whether any one trained intelligently in the methods of science could now imagine that such things exist to be violated as independent and autocratic laws of nature. But this is not the important part of Hume's essay. That comes when he goes on to argue, in effect, that the more a statement of fact conflicts with previous experience, the more complete must be the evidence which is to justify us in believing it. We must demand from those who solicit our faith, evidence of a cogency proportionate to the miracle's departure from probability. As he sums up in a famous sentence: "The consequence is that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish." This is the operative thought to-day in the minds of plain men to whom miracle is unbelievable. Upon it we may venture these remarks. We ought to accept the suggestion that what is called the science of history (though in fact there can be no such thing as a *science* of history, the material of study not being subject to set laws) cannot be forced to recognise miracle. At most, the historian as such will be agnostic about it. You will never compel a belief in the resurrection which has any religious power by piling up external evidences. On the other hand, Hume's argument loses even the semblance of conclusiveness if we bring in the reality of God as Jesus made Him known. Mill took this point with his usual justice. "Once admit a God," he wrote, "and the production by His direct volition of an effect which in any case owed its origin to His creative will is no longer a purely arbitrary hypothesis to account for the fact, but must be reckoned with as a serious possibility."

It is doubtful whether anything of substance has been added to the negative arguments of Spinoza or Hume, since they wrote ; though of course their positions have been set forth more modernly or elaborately or clumsily by others. Amongst the best statements of this kind are J. S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* and *God and the Bible*, F. C. Baur's *Church History* (Eng. Tr. chap. i.), and Lecky's *Rationalism in Europe* (chaps. i. and ii.). The most detailed recent study of the evidence in the case of primitive Christian records is that of J. M. Thompson's *Miracles in the New Testament* (1911). Mr. Thompson's conclusions are in great measure of a negative sort, but it must not be forgotten that he is firmly convinced that to reject miracles is not to reject the supernatural, and that the old belief in miracles ought to give way to the belief that a supernatural power works in and through natural events.

Turning now to the positive side, we shall do well to start with an article published in the *Harvard Theological Review* for 1915 from the pen of Professor W. Adams Brown, and entitled "The Permanent Significance of Miracle for Religion." This is an unusually fine piece of work—wise, careful, balanced, and rightly concerned to put and keep first things first. In the main it is a psychological study, but considerations of objective truth and value break in at times, as they were bound to do. The writer asks three questions : how men have come to believe in miracle at all, what issue is at stake in the belief, and what place it is likely to hold in the religion of the future. He defines miracle as "an exceptional event, or quality in an event, in nature or in human life, the significance of which religious faith finds in the self-revealing activity of Deity. It is a strange fact with a divine meaning—a luminous surprise." Always in the mind of one who beholds miracle there is

this combination of awe and enlightenment, the sense of wonder and the sense of meaning. We rightly apply the term miraculous to an event by which men are constrained to say: "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." In this sense the thing is as old as religion and as universal; it lives on persistently, despite repeated announcements of its death. So long as the world is full of surprises through which God may speak, the possibility of miracle is present, both as a marvel and as a sign. But more, in miracle there comes to man a new access of vitality and power, repeating the marvel of creation in his own experience. "It is here only that we reach the heart of the miracle-belief. Miracle is the way in which man confesses his faith in a God who can do things, and is doing them. . . . Is God, or is He not, alive and free, able to meet present needs as well as the needs of the past, to act here and act to-day? Miracle answers this question in the affirmative." The centre of interest becomes inward more than outward; it lies in conversion more than in deliverance from famine. And in Judaism and Christianity special importance accrues to the historical deeds of God—events possessed of crucial meaning not merely for this or that individual believer but for the life of the whole race. But whether inward or outward, miracle "brings us face to face with God in so direct and first-hand a fashion that there is no possibility of our being mistaken as to His identity." "The final proof of the right of the great miracles to hold their central place on the stage of history is the fact that they have been and continue still to be the parents of an innumerable progeny." So long as faith in a personal God exists miracle will remain, "for miracle is the way in which the personal God communicates His will to man."

For the man who is tempted to say that the question of miracle is settled, and that theology has more important

problems on its hands, Dr. Adams Brown's article will make educative reading. It shows with rare insight why the problem is incessantly rising up anew.

The best general book on the whole subject, in my judgment, is Wendland's *Miracles and Christianity*. As was justly said by a reviewer when the English translation of this book appeared, "miracle is its proper subject, not miracles." No attempt is made to study in a detailed way the supernatural events of the Bible or even of the New Testament. Throughout, in the name of faith, it is argued that a world characterised solely or supremely by the rigid causal nexus of physics or necessitarian history is a world too dead to make room either for the living God or the living soul. Religion is essentially miraculous, and its experiences can only be explained by the entrance into the life of man of a God who is perpetually present and perpetually at work. As it has been put: "The look at life which religion gives us is not only the legitimate, but the supreme and final one." So far from being an inert mass in the grip of blind mechanical necessity, the world is shot through with freedom, human and Divine. This emphatic reiteration that faith in miracle is faith in a living God is one of the striking features of Wendland's book; others are his insistence that there are no "immutable laws of nature" which miracle has to violate; and that we cannot limit miracle to the past or to the human soul, ignoring the incessant new departures to be found in the spheres both of nature and of redemption. Discussion of the subject has been so frequently spoiled by premature controversies about some particular miraculous incident in the Bible, that we are specially grateful to the man who tries to give us one or two sound principles, such as spring from the very nature of faith. We want to know whether we are living in a supernaturally constituted universe, or whether naturalistic

monism has the last word. And it is our wisdom to ask whether in the experience of God and His living relations to us which we actually have as Christian believers, there may not be all the materials we need for an answer to this crucial question.

In the course of this appeal for belief in miracle of the kind which religious men still experience and still perform, Wendland offers wise and stimulating discussions of miracle in relation to development, revelation, providence, and prayer; he vindicates the metaphysical possibility of special miracle; and he gives in the first three chapters a valuable sketch of the form taken by this faith in Biblical times as well as a brief history of the conception of miracle in the Christian centuries. The most important point at which Wendland may fail to carry even friendly readers with him is this. The immutable laws of nature reappear under the new name of the "analogies of experience," and out of respect to them he denies, e.g., the physical resurrection of Christ. Whatever we may think of this on other grounds, it appears to me an inconsistency in his argument. If, as he tells us, faith when confronted by miracle has the perception "that there is a working of God, immediate and personal, *not merely in the life of spirit but in that of sense,*"¹ then it is not for faith to put inexorable limits to what the Father may do, in nature as in the soul. There is only one universe after all, and to split this single system into two halves, the physical and the spiritual, is equally bad philosophy and bad religion. But apart from this, there is no book on the subject more acute and exhilarating. When God comes into man's life as Redeemer, Wendland protests, the one thing he is sure of is that determinism is false.

Mozley's volume of Bampton Lectures *On Miracles* (1865)

¹ The italics are mine.

is, like all his work, too strong and firm in intellectual texture ever to become quite obsolete. He characteristically points out that apart from belief in God, belief in miracle is of no account. "It requires a great religious assumption in our minds to begin with, without which no testimony in the case can avail." This is a truth on which it is impossible to insist too often. A few hours since I read two seriously-meant discussions of miracle which, although written by Christians, nowhere referred to the being or character of God, but proceeded as if the matter could be quite satisfactorily debated from below in terms of nature, law, evolution and the like. But Mozley knew better. The precise form given by him to his general contention that if spirit be regarded as above matter and capable of moving it, then miracle is possible, is however somewhat unacceptable now. We do not feel it necessary any longer to hold that miracle is essential to a revelation, as an accrediting seal, nor is his distinction between the laws of nature (which may be suspended) and the laws of the universe (a suspension of which would be a contradiction) either luminous or helpful. But we still need his reminder that to believe in cosmic order and to cherish a mechanical expectation of recurrence are not the same thing.

Parallels between the thought of Bushnell and of Ritschl have attracted some notice, and the similarity touches their ideas of the supernatural. Both challenged the view of miracles for which they are breaches of natural law; to Ritschl they are events recognised by faith as acts of God, to Bushnell, in his *Nature and the Supernatural as together constituting the one System of God* (1858), they are exceptional instances of the continuous activity of God present in the world. Miracles belong to the revelation of the higher order opened to us in Christ. They fit into the world's constitution, for the world was made to receive Christianity.

Bushnell would have echoed Kirn's dictum that "freedom is the miracle of man, miracle the freedom of God," for he brought the supernatural in God's redeeming action into the closest connexion and analogy with the supernatural in a free moral act of man. Man can produce effects in nature not producible by nature as left to itself ; the universe is plastic to will ; it is so for us, *a fortiori* it is so for God. A famous passage in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* touches the same point with extraordinary imaginative power. He scouts the petty notion that "the miraculous, by simple repetition, ceases to be miraculous," and proceeds thus : "Were it not miraculous, could I stretch forth my hand and clutch the Sun ? Yet thou seest me dally stretch forth my hand and therewith clutch many a thing, and swing it hither and thither. Art thou a grown baby, then, to fancy that the miracle lies in miles of distance, or in pounds avoirdupois of weight ; and not to see that the true inexplicable God-revealing miracle lies in this, that I can stretch forth my hand at all ; that I have Free Force to clutch aught therewith ?" Bushnell, of course, gives a specifically religious application of this basal principle, urging that our need has been made desperate by sin. "There is no hope for man or human society, under sin, save in the supernatural interposition of God."

By much the ablest and most penetrating defence of miracle on the philosophical side which has become available in recent years is Professor A. G. Hogg's *Redemption from this World* (1922).¹ The writer sets about his task in a spirit of infectious confidence. "Among the Christian verities," he writes, "the supernatural or miraculous is so far from being the most difficult of philosophical defence that, on the contrary, it is one of the easiest to construe in a

¹ As Professor Hogg's line of reasoning is difficult, and even highly intricate, I have for the most part kept closely to his own language.

philosophically unexceptionable manner.”¹ And he speaks with just severity of the theory which accepts the wonderful events recorded in the New Testament but will hear nothing of marvels happening, under God, here and now. “The only ‘supernatural’ worth defending, the only ‘supernatural’ that will be not a burden on faith, but its inspiration, is the supernatural as a permanent factor in that life of spiritual adventure which is practical Christianity.” This has a look of being read off the lives of great missionaries to whom real religion is life on a plane of boundless new possibilities in loyalty to the promise of the Father. Hogg puts his argument in the most intimate relation to the apocalyptic elements in the Gospels, but from this we may abstract for the moment.

The message of Jesus, in its essence, is that for faith God’s redemptive or supernatural interposition is and has always been available. Faith brings into our limited familiar world an irruption of energies from a wider cosmic order, enabling us, as it did Jesus in His higher way, to accomplish seeming impossibilities. God does not act according to rules or natural laws; His will is always individual; and what passes for the order of nature, and is rightly treated as such by science in its schematic fashion, is far from being coincident with the greater order hidden in God’s will. The wonder is that the two should approximate as closely as they do. We have no right to assume that “the Divine Mind in nature cannot be orderly or rational unless God directs the course of things in accordance with fixed rules which He decided upon from the beginning and maintains intact;” each new event, rather, “He must decree on the individual merits of the situation out of which it springs.” There is a higher orderliness, in short, than that of acting solely by rule. Hence “it is in no degree surprising that

¹ See note, page 414.

contraventions of what we take to be a system of rules or natural laws imposed by God upon Himself should sometimes occur." On ordinary levels, the levels of natural phenomena with the control of which men in general may well be entrusted, science with its exact tests is supremely in place, yet "surely the subtle texture of the cosmic order must be shot through with potencies which only the touch of filial fingers can evoke, and which only a spirit of confiding trust and eager loyalty is competent to direct." If by "natural events" we mean events as we scientifically construe them, the "special providences" are acts of God in a more eminent sense. Miracles are preternatural special providences. By their preternaturalness they render perceptibly evident the infinity of God, and by their character as special providences they render perceptibly manifest the individuality of His wisdom and grace.

As I have said, this massive and vigilant account of miracle in its specifically religious sense appears to me one which every student of the subject ought to read and master. I do not myself feel that it needs to be accepted out and out, as if we must choose between all of it and nothing. In particular, his distinction between special providence and miracle appears to me more than doubtful. But at least the writer brings us back irresistibly to the mind of Jesus. The suggestion that Jesus would not have ventured His daring thoughts regarding miracle had He had before Him the modern scientific view of the world, is one at which faith only needs to look twice to reject it utterly. What Jesus lived by was not a world view, scientific or other, for that is something which is constantly being re-modelled; He lived by communion with the living God, who does not change. And it is as we regain Jesus' thought of the Father and His absolute liberty to help us, that we become sure of both things: first, that miracle is

an idea of permanent religious worth, secondly that those who have met God in Jesus and been changed by the meeting know themselves to be living in a world whose constitution is not at variance with those new departures initiated by God's love to which the name "miracle" is rightly given. My own impression, for what it is worth, is that every deeply Christian man believes in miracle, whatever he may say. Harnack, for instance, argues strenuously for the position that "as an interruption of the order of Nature, there can be no such thing as 'miracles.'" But Harnack is a believer. Turn the page, therefore, and you will find him closing on a different note. "The question on which everything turns," he there writes, "is whether we are helplessly yoked to an inexorable necessity, or whether a God exists who rules and governs, and *whose power to compel Nature we can move by prayer.*"¹ Could a more suggestive phrase be found ?

We have seen that a fairly general disposition prevails among present-day theologians to depart from the older view of miracle as a breach or violation of the laws of nature. This tendency, however, was sharply challenged in 1908 by the late Professor Herrmann, of Marburg, in his *Offenbarung und Wunder*. Previously, he owns, he had shared the opinion of those who contended that an event may be genuinely miraculous and yet also an integral part of the system of natural causation ; but he had changed his mind. We have only to apply the newer view to some supernatural experience in our own lives to find it breaking down hopelessly. Faith insists that miracle is a real exception to the uniformity of things. On the other hand, there is nothing to be gained by casting discredit on the inviolable regularity of nature. Christians can no more dispense with it than other people. If faith needs miracle,

¹ *What is Christianity ?* p. 30. The italics are mine.

life and work need unvarying laws ; and our wisdom is to admit that minds like ours cannot really combine these two *prima facie* certainties in a consistent whole. There is here an intellectual burden, a cross, which the Christian simply has to bear. Herrmann prolongs his argument in a strain with which his readers are more familiar. He can accept no miracles from tradition ; to believe in miracle, we must experience it. Nothing can be called revelation in the strict sense but the fact of Jesus' inner life—that objectively given fact or power which transforms us supernaturally by winning the free assent of conscience and heart. “This religious experience alone,” he declares, “is, in the Christian point of view, sheerly miraculous.” Many will feel that the earlier part of this argument is slightly perverse. Before Herrmann (on one side of his mind, so to say) hauled down the flag before uniform laws of nature, it might have been worth while to spend more time in asking what exactly uniformity means in a non-mechanical world, a world inclusive not of life merely, but of history. His case for ultimate dualism fails, as I think, when confronted with the sounder contention that “in miracle the natural order is supplemented, not cancelled ; the issue in this case need not contradict that order, though it would not be such as the natural order could of itself produce.”¹

On the general lines of Wendland's book, but showing the effect of Herrmann's intervention, is Hunzinger's brief but solid work, *Das Wunder* (1912). Miracle is present, he holds, wherever God's purpose to save takes concrete form at a definite point in the space-time world. This is the authentically religious view ; and older thought missed it, by treating the problem as one in rational cosmology. We

¹ This sentence is taken from Principal Galloway's suggestive paper on the Supernatural in his recent volume, *Religion and Modern Thought* (1922).

have to choose—either miracle is of interest solely for the theological antiquarian, or it is vital to the Gospel. Three points emerge at which experience shows miracle: the creation of faith by God's word, the felt providential action of God in life, and the hearing of prayer.¹ But miracle is only *contra naturam* if by that unlucky phrase, which has always been misleading, we mean contrary to man's "natural" life in sin. As regards the exact truth of particular Gospel narratives every Christian man must judge for himself; no general principle can be imposed by dogma. Natural science in any case cannot veto miracle; the mechanical view of the cosmos is radically unsound. There is a good closing chapter on miracle and historical research, in the course of which Hunzinger rejects *in toto* the fantastic and mythological idea of "laws of history."² But to say that the scientific historian can know nothing of miracle is not to say that they cannot happen. They may quite well happen, though by the rules of his limited science the historian is debarred from acknowledging their presence. He is bound to leave a blank in his construction rather than bring in what for him is an illegitimately transcendent factor.

The good books on the miracles of the New Testament, treating of them in detail and from an exegetical and homiletic standpoint, are comparatively few in number, so far as I know. Bruce's *Miraculous Element in the Gospels* (1886) is best, but it ought to be supplemented by Dr. A. C. Headlam's *Miracles of the New Testament* (1914), as well as Mr. E. R. Micklem's fresh and careful *Miracles and the New*

¹ H. E. Fosdick's *Meaning of Prayer* contains much excellent material on this.

² Ed. Meyer writes in his *Zur Theorie und Methodik der Geschichte*: "During a long course of historical inquiry I have never myself discovered a law of history, nor have I ever met with one in the mind of any other. It may be taken or agreed that laws of history have, so far, no existence save as postulates." (Quoted by Wendland, p. 289.)

Psychology (1922). Mr. Micklem treats only of the healing miracles of the New Testament, asking whether it is possible to explain them psychologically. Jesus, he suggests, may have been possessed of psychical power superior to that of His contemporaries or of ourselves. On the prior question, whether cases of this sort as recorded by the Evangelists were actually wrought by Jesus, the writer, especially in the case of demon-possession, reaches positive conclusions, all the more impressive that the note is never forced.

Our list may now be made up as follows :—

(a) Against Miracle :

- (1) Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*.
- (2) Hume's *Essay on Miracles*.

(b) In defence and exposition of Miracle :

- (3) W. Adams Brown's article in the *Harvard Theological Review* for 1915.
- (4) Wendland's *Miracles and Christianity*.
- (5) Mozley's Bampton Lectures, *On Miracles*.
- (6) Bushnell's *Nature and the Supernatural*.
- (7) Hogg's *Redemption from this World*.
- (8) Herrmann's *Offenbarung und Wunder*.
- (9) Hunzinger's *Das Wunder*.
- (10) Bruce's *Miraculous Element in the Gospels*.

H. R. MACKINTOSH.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT.

II

THE sin against which this commandment is directed is a very natural one. No one, not even the most degraded idolater, one would suppose, thinks that the piece of wood or stone that he has carved out with his own hand is the real God. If he be a Christian, praying before the image of