

béliefs with which to crédit men whom we scarcely know save through their works. But who would have suspected that such a flourishing of art had existed in these backward ages, suggesting old masters and schools of art and traditional methods? If art existed, why not religion? Quaternary man, though primitive enough, was far from being

primitive man, and since the days of that mysterious personage who, if certain anthropologists are to be believed, was a natural atheist and *se passait de dieux*, sufficient time had elapsed for religion to evolve itself. And perhaps primitive man had also his moments of religious insight and aspiration!

## Miracles as Signs.

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'CHRISTIANITY is immortal; it has eternal truth, inexhaustible value, a boundless future. But our popular religion at present conceives the birth, ministry, and death of Christ, as altogether steeped in prodigy, brimful of miracle;—*and miracles do not happen.*' These are familiar words of Matthew Arnold, to be found at the end of the 1883 Preface to *Literature and Dogma*. They still represent the convictions of many minds, not perhaps devout, but certainly not alienated from God. The intrinsic credibility of miracles is denied by men who profess great reverence for the 'teaching' of Christ. It is the 'teaching' of Christ that is immortal; it is the 'teaching' of Christ that has eternal truth. And those who have been concerned to defend miracles have, for the most part, done so for the sake of the 'teaching,' because miracles were a proof of the doctrine or essential to the proof of it. The evidential value of miracles has occupied chief attention. Mozley, in his rather unsympathetic Bampton Lectures, finds in the doctrine the cause of the change in the moral condition of mankind, and acknowledges that the doctrine has produced a new power of action, and, because this is so, goes on to find the paramount value of miracles in their evidence of doctrine. To inform us that the teaching was of divine origin and the commandments of divine obligation, miracles were performed. The inevitable consequence is that if miracles are successfully challenged—and the measure of success in the challenge is almost an individual matter—then the doctrine is discredited.

The question is whether it is the true view of miracles to regard them as chiefly valuable as 'proof' of doctrine, or essential to the proof of it. Miracles have to be regarded from the proper point of view if they are to be truly appreciated. Spinoza

was preoccupied with the thought that they were interruptions of nature, and concluded that 'they cannot give us any knowledge of God, and that we cannot understand anything from them.' This thought of the 'interruption of nature' has led the modern critic to draw up a graduated scale of credibility—at the top of the scale those miracles that present the closest analogy to our own experiences, at the bottom of the scale such miracles as the Raising of Lazarus, because we can say of them that they 'do not happen.'

The biblical writer who had thought longest about miracles never calls them miracles. The invariable name in St. John's Gospel is 'sign.' Now, the chief value of a sign lies in what it points to. So that this name might be thought to support Mozley's contention that the chief value of miracles is evidential. But when we come to examine the 'signs' of St. John's Gospel we find that they are, in the language of the XXXIX Articles, 'effectual' signs—signs that carry their effect with them. And this fact is also clear in the Synoptic Gospels. When our Lord healed the paralysed man (Mk 2<sup>1-12</sup>), He said to him, 'Child, thy sins have been forgiven thee.' And when the Scribes accused Him in their hearts of blasphemy, Jesus said to them, 'Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier, to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins have been forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy), I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thine house.' It is evident that the healing of the man's body did not so much support our Lord's claim to forgive the man's sins as actually symbolize the forgiveness. There was

the closest connexion, too, between the symbol and what it symbolized. Without interpreting our Lord's words to mean that special sin in this man had resulted in the paralysis of his limbs, it is generally true to say that disease is the result of sin, and that the 'putting away' or 'forgiveness' of sin would also be the putting away of disease. Further, the sign carried its effect with it—when the man's body was healed, his sins were forgiven.

Now, Christ himself declares the supreme importance of this symbolic meaning. After the great sign of the Feeding of the Five Thousand with the five loaves and two fishes, Christ said to the multitude, 'Ye seek me, not because ye saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves and were filled.' There could not be plainer evidence that the people had fixed their attention upon the outward, material and visible, and neglected the inward, spiritual and invisible, which these symbolized. In short, they had not *seen* the sign at all. They had been fed by Christ, but they had not seen His sign. And so we find them asking, 'What then doest thou for a sign, that we may see and believe thee?'

In St. John's Gospel we find also that Christ states the interpretation of His signs. Signs are treated in an exactly parallel manner to the parables, or rather to the parables that are strictly symbolic, such as The Sower and The Tares. The Feeding of the Five Thousand is interpreted, 'I am the Bread of Life'; the recovery of sight to the Blind Man is interpreted, 'I am Light of the world'; the Raising of Lazarus is interpreted, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' Some of the interpretations are peculiarly significant. The great declaration, 'I am the Light of the world,' is repeated before the healing of the blind man in a special form, 'I am Light of (or to) the world,' as if this sign were a particular illustration of the principle before enunciated. The Walking on the Sea is interpreted, 'I am, be not afraid,' meaning that there is no impossibility of His Presence, but that He ever comes to the help of those who believe in Him. It is worth repeating here that each of these interpretations begins with the words 'I am,' recalling the ancient name of Jéhovah, and in themselves constituting a claim to divinity.

Further, the effect of parables on those who listened to them without grasping their essential meaning is thus stated by our Lord Himself

(Mt 13<sup>14, 15</sup>). 'Unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith—

By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand;

And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:

For this people's heart is waxed gross,

And their ears are dull of hearing,

And their eyes they have closed;

Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes,

And hear with their ears,

And understand with their heart,

And should turn again,

And I should heal them.'

And in Jn 12<sup>37-40</sup> we read, 'But though he had done so many *signs* before them, yet they believed not on him: that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake—

Lord, who hath believed our report?

And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For this cause they could not believe, for that Isaiah said again—

He hath blinded their eyes, and he hardened their heart;

Lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart,

And should turn,

And I should heal them.'

Signs are thus set forth in St. John's Gospel as 'touchstones of character,' in the same way as parables are set before us in the Synoptic Gospels. An examination of the signs of St. John's Gospel will convince any candid inquirer that this is not one aspect of miracles out of many, but the one essential aspect recognized by the writer. Miracles are signs. If we lose sight of their symbolic meaning, we lose sight of that which Christ specially meant us to see. St. John knew that the final, the supreme object of miracles was to teach. Nicodemus said, 'Rabbi, we know that thou art a Teacher come from God: for no man can do these signs that thou doest except God be with him.' His view of miracles was the common view, that they are credentials of divine mission. And Nicodemus approached Christ in order that he might be taught by word of mouth, But St. John would lead us to see that 'the teacher of Israel' ought to have been taught by the signs themselves.

There is a very remarkable instance of the way in which our Lord spoke of miracles when men

regarded them merely as proofs of divine power. In the second sign of St. John's Gospel—the Healing of the Court-officer's Son who was sick at Capernaum, our Lord Himself being at Cana of Galilee, He said, in answer to the man's request to come down and heal his son, 'Except ye see signs *and wonders* ye will not believe.' The word 'wonders' (*répara*) marks the external aspect of miracles. Our Lord used it here because he was speaking to a man who had no apprehension of the essential value of miracles, that they are signs, teaching deeper truths than meet the eye.

If St. John's view of miracles be true, then we cannot insist on what Matthew Arnold used to call the 'natural truth' of Christianity, and leave 'miracles and the supernatural' out of sight. There is no claim that Jesus Christ made, there is no truth that Jesus Christ taught that is not bound up with His signs. If we leave His signs out of sight, we must leave Him out of sight. And the truths that His signs teach are the best evidence that they happened. We find Jesus Christ making certain claims and teaching certain fundamental truths. Then we go to His miracles, and we find in them not merely evidence of 'supernatural' power, but outward visible signs of the same claims that He makes, and the same truths that He teaches. In short, we find not that miracles prove doctrine, but that *miracles are doctrine*. It is not possible 'to pass from a Christianity relying on its miracles to a Christianity relying on its natural truth,' for a Christianity that relies on its miracles *is* a Christianity that relies on its natural truth—the truth that is 'natural' to Jesus Christ. The truth that is 'natural' to any man is exhibited by certain signs. We read the man's 'truth' in those signs, and we cannot possibly dissociate the 'truth' that is in him, the truth that *is* the man, from those signs.

St. John would teach us, then; that we are not to be concerned with establishing the 'credibility' of miracles, but with interpreting their meaning. Our duty towards signs is the same as our duty towards parables. We do not go about to prove that the parables were spoken by Jesus Christ, or that they could have been spoken by Him; we strive to understand what they teach. So we are

not concerned to prove that the signs were given by Jesus Christ, or could have been given by Him; we are concerned with the spiritual truths that they teach. If those who read the Holy Scriptures read them with this determination, we shall no longer find one speaking, for example, of the turning of the water into wine at the marriage-feast at Cana of Galilee as a 'perfectly useless miracle.' It will be seen to be the sign of God Creator. For from power to change at will created things we are to infer power to create, for the working of change is a kind of creation.

Again, the miracle of the Raising of Lazarus will not be placed lowest in the scale of credibility, because we have no experience of such raisings, but high up in the scale of teaching signs, teaching men of Christ 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' From the very conditions of His Incarnation He could not demonstrate for others the spiritual truth of this great pronouncement, but He could demonstrate the physical truth, and leave the faithful to apply it to the things of the spirit. The first consequence of this 'I am' could be seen in the case of Lazarus to be literally true: 'He that believeth on me, even if he die, yet shall he live.' The dead man rose up at the call of the Christ and came forth alive. The second consequence—that which touched the living—must be a matter of faith, and of faith that had to face out the fact of inevitable 'falling asleep': 'Whosoever liveth, and believeth on me, shall never die.'

This consideration of the spiritual meaning of miracles seems to be specially important for those whose work lies in the Eastern mission field. The Eastern mind is not convinced by miracles. One of our most heroic Japanese missionaries said: 'The Eastern will match the gospel miracles with miracles that seem to him as wonderful in his own history. You cannot convert him to Christianity through miracles.' But if the teacher of Christ were concerned to find in the miracles signs of those spiritual truths that are the foundation of the Christian religion, it is possible that a new power might be found in the record of those things that Jesus did. For in this matter also it is the 'letter that killeth, but the Spirit that giveth life.'