

FAITH
AND
THOUGHT

1977
vol. 104
No. 1

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research

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MIRACLES: PHINEAS IN THE SERVICE
OF GOD IN THE ZOHAR

In this unusual essay Nancy Elkin analyses, in her inimitable way, the doubts of modern man about the God whose ways are past finding out. Is it true that no one knows about God's miracles save God Himself?

The passage quoted below from the *Book of Zohar* tells how the Kabbalist Phineas, the great Simeon ben Yohai's father-in-law, expresses appreciation for a miracle which God supposedly worked on his behalf. By implication the question of whether God has continued to work miracles on our behalf — now, in this age — is brought into focus:

We are told that God alone works great marvels, for his mercy is forever enduring. How much good God brings to people, how many marvels he initiates for them everyday, and yet nobody knows about them except God himself.¹

This comment in its own way defines the basis for religion: when something beneficent falls to us, we attribute it to God. Religion's problem, however, is what to say when beneficence abandons us. Certainly Western civilization has educated people to look for causes behind events; yet we are given to suspect that the truly important things are fatally ordained and that we are not to try to touch the spiritual gearbox of the universe. In fact it is under lock-and-key; it is password-protected.

Phineas is neither a genic prophet nor a pre-confirmation simpleton; he simply relates things back to himself in an unaffected and rather emotional fashion, as if he was privy to God's innermost secrets. His attitude could be considered borderline solipsism, were it not for its non-toxic, mildly oneiric nature. But in view of the risks involved in summing things so tidily, we step back from Phineas's immediate presence, take a long and thoughtful look at him, and cease to take him seriously.

Yet Phineas has actually found the sweet-painted-lady in God's nonlegalistic, underpoliced, injudicial universe: our longing for miracles — for a kind of compromising of the divine body — derives strictly from the order of things. Phineas, God's sleuth, exclaims, Ah, ha — some cosmic mischief has been abroad here — but we, pedestrian and impassive, are not impressed. So Phineas must resort to a declaration of miracles in order to elevate the direly commonplace into the numinous, and if in his overenthusiasm we are made to feel a bit restless, it is because we have no sublime cables-of-greeting from heaven, as he does. Phineas assumes that if we were to have the same information about the universe that he has, we would feel the same way.

But given the ignominious extent to which we are uninformed, there do seem to be perplexing and multiphasic differences between ourselves and the Kabbalist. Whenever God works an anonymous change, Phineas guesses what has happened and we, as men of the word, do not. Is it not ungenerous of God, so to speak, to have been so miserly with such crucial data? Does it not beg the teleological question? Ought we to assume that God's deliberate pulling of the wool over our eyes has a function? Would he want to prevent our impetuosity? Such insinuations with regard to God's nocuousness would be offensive to Phineas, given his open-armed embracing of God's every act, but despite this, man perseveres in giving his testimony.

God, then, works wonders on left and right and yet appears to be no more industrious than an itinerant sundowner; and although during the period of the Old Testament he never hesitated to set Gabriel's cornet ablowing in praise of his own mercies, by the time of Phineas God's forbearing spirit was beginning to go unsung. Hence the Kabbalist's quick footwork in getting the praise-be-the-Lord train back on its rails. Modern man would question if God is worthy and deserving of such chivalrous handling.

We admit that it is not the appropriate response to abuse the concept of God in this way; the Zoharian *non sequiturs* and mixed metaphors with which the Kabbalah is so copiously filled should only be explained in religious terms, since any other approach does them an injustice. But the human race is in the throes of a massive abortion, and while we need God's comfort — he does not seem to be here. He visited the planet, or the dimension, or the spatial plane, a few times — to talk to the forefathers, to heap compliments and reprimands upon the human race — and then he blasted off again. Where is God when we need him?

Men feel ashamed of this necessity for leadership: ashamed of the God-requisite. Nonetheless, fears are notoriously tenacious, and man has yet to get used to the fact that he must have his ration of miracle-working in this era too, if he wants to maintain even the semi-state of autonomy he now has. God is about in the world, working invisible wonders for his own enjoyment. Does He think man needs him less than before?, we know man's need of Him is greater. God is having a telecommunications problem, we suppose; or using a different radio frequency to ours. We scan the skies; he hides behind black stars. We search for him electromagnetically; he evades us by sliding down rainbows. We beg bones in heaven's back alleys; he heads racy for some other astronomical body. We have compromised ourselves for God, he has paid us, and now he is off on a voyage whose course has no bearing on where we are now and where we would have hoped to be in the future. And yet we search, we search.

What, after all, is the Bible full of if not subpoenas to God? Writs of *habeas corpus* against his kidnappers — since he has of course been taken hostage? Open letters to the powers-that-be and the powers that should have been? We often feel that we were but a hairsbreadth away from persuading him to return, when he suddenly met a new challenge and left us to face our failures alone. The wonders are over and the marvels are past; now all we can do is ease our burden with the makeshift miracles that technology offers.

But lest we drink too deeply of the devil's poison, the Kabbalah comes to the rescue in the person of Phineas, that ever-resourceful fantasist when it comes to explaining away God's frequent absences. Rather than appearing as God's nemesis, Phineas is featured on the bill as ours: we must conform to the convenient view of God as the stern but well-intentioned bumbler, he says, if we are to have any rationalization at all for why we stand so bewildered in the supposed presence of God's grace. That grace — that geometrically involuted curve of passion and paradox that God has wound about us like the desperate web of a dying spider — binds us tight, and yet leaves us feyly free to touch the web, and question it, and fear it. The graces of God are the greatest mystery in that they inform other mysteries: the miracles of God. Yet, though grace inform mystery, mystery underlies our orphanhood as well — and it is with this claim, this accusation, this knowledge that our rejection of Satan does not necessarily entail an acceptance by God — that we wonder at Phineas, and gaze at him with a wry bitterness.

So God's world is wanting in our eyes. But a stubborn faith in God's ability to make entropy obsolete — by appearing in the world even when the thermodynamic function says there is no chance of his appearing — turns and twists in us like the creature that lies at our soul's core; in fact that faith and that creature are

one and the same entity. Of God's true nature we know nothing, except that it is not to humiliate us that he works his miracles, but to buoy us up in that great sea of aimless forces across which Satan sails.

REFERENCE

- 1 Based on a passage in "The Wisdom of the Zohar: Texts from the Book of Splendour", Vol. I, F. Lachover and I. Tishby, 3rd. ed., 1971, The Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, pp. 11-18. Paraphrased translation is mine.

BOOKS

"One of the diseases of this age is the multiplicity of books; they doth so overcharge the world that it is not able to digest the abundance of idle matter that is every day hatched and brought forth into the world" Barnaby Rich, 1613 (Quoted *Nature* 262, 731).