

707TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING,

HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B, THE CENTRAL HALL,
WESTMINSTER, S.W.1, ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6TH, 1928,

AT 4.30 P.M.

THE REV. CANON MARMADUKE WASHINGTON, M.A.,
IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed, and signed, and the HON. SECRETARY announced the following elections:—David Ramsay Smith, Esq., M.I.M.E., as a Member; and the Rev. A. E. Shorrock, B.A., and the Rev. H. K. A. Philp as Associates. He then announced that the Council wished him to communicate to the Meeting the sad news of the decease of the Treasurer, Sir George Anthony King, M.A., Chief Master of the Supreme Court Taxing Office, and for a considerable time a Member of our Council and a Trustee of the Institute.

The CHAIRMAN proposed that a resolution be forwarded to Lady King and other relatives, from the Meeting, expressing sincere sympathy with them in their heavy loss. Those who approved of the same were requested to rise.

The CHAIRMAN then called on the Rev. A. H. Finn to read his paper on "The Miraculous in Holy Scripture."

THE MIRACULOUS IN HOLY SCRIPTURE.

By THE REV. A. H. FINN.

WHILE the large amount of prediction in Scripture is hardly realized by most people, there is, on the other hand, some tendency to exaggerate the amount of the miraculous. Many seem to think that every page of Scriptural history is full of miracles. That is not the case. There are three great periods marked by an unusual profusion of miraculous events, and these are (1) the latter part of the life of Moses; (2) the times of Elijah and Elisha; and (3) the times of our Lord and of His Apostles. The Exodus period extends from the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt to their entry into the Promised Land; but all this really centres in the manifestation

of God at Sinai, and, therefore, has to do with the giving of the Law. There were prophets (notably Samuel) in the earlier days, yet Elijah and Elisha may fairly be taken as outstanding types of the long and brilliant line of Prophets. The third period is, of course, that of bringing in the New Covenant, the Gospel. Apart from these, the amount of miracles in Scripture is not large, and there are long stretches of Israelite history in which no miracle is recorded. Miraculous events yet to come—such as the cleaving of the Mount of Olives, the destruction of the Man of Sin, and the marvels of the Apocalypse—are indeed foretold, but these hardly fall within the scope of this paper, beyond noting that these are to usher in another great Era. The Scriptures, then, lead us to believe that periods of special miraculous activity are connected with the great stages of God's plan of Redemption, and are, therefore, charged with Purpose and Meaning.

It is sometimes rather taken for granted that a miracle is necessarily an interference with the ordinary course of Nature, if not an actual breach of the laws of Nature. There are, however (as we shall see), a good many events recorded, usually considered miracles, which were brought about by natural forces. Indeed, it is not easy to frame a definition of "a miracle." The word in itself means "something to be wondered at," and there is a Hebrew word, *Niphlaoth*, applied in Exod. iii, 20, to the Plagues of Egypt, and rightly translated "wonders." Yet evidently this is too wide a term, for there are (especially nowadays) many wonderful things which cannot be called miracles. The words most commonly used in Scripture are the Hebrew *Oth* (a sign) and *Mopheth* (a portent), corresponding to the Greek *σημείον* and *τέρας*, but these also are too wide. The rainbow was a "sign," and comets and eclipses have been looked on as "portents," yet these are not miracles. There is another New Testament word, *ἔργα* (works), used by our Lord Himself (John xiv, 10, 11, 12; xv, 24), but this, too, must be limited by understanding it to mean Divine, not human, works. The word "miracle," too, is often popularly used in a loose sense, as when one has emerged from imminent danger it is said "he escaped by a miracle," or when people talk of "the miracles of modern science." That only means something so unexpected or unprecedented as to have appeared antecedently impossible or at least highly improbable.

Since none of these words taken singly are quite satisfactory, perhaps the nearest approach to a definition of a true miracle

may be arrived at by combining the ideas conveyed by the various Scriptural terms. It would run somewhat thus :—

A miracle is a wonderful “work” wrought by God, whether mediately through some natural force or immediately by direct Divine power, sufficiently unusual and startling to be a “portent,” effecting some worthy purpose, and, therefore, charged with a meaning which would constitute it a “sign” to men.

Such a definition would exclude most, if not all, of the prodigies found in ancient secular histories, and perhaps many of more recent date.

Of the marvellous occurrences recorded in Scripture, a good many may be reasonably taken to have been brought about through means well within the realm of Nature. The Deluge is explicitly attributed to prolonged heavy rain and the breaking up of “the fountains of the great deep,” caused probably by submarine disturbances, seismic or volcanic. The dividing of the waters of the Red Sea, their sudden return, and the second flight of quails (Num. xi, 31) are accounted for by the action of strong winds. Recently the destruction of the Cities of the Plain has been attributed to the exhalation of bituminous and sulphurous vapours ignited possibly by lightning. Lightning may also account for the several descents of “fire from heaven”—the burning at Taberah (Num. xi, 1); the destruction of Korah’s associates (Num. xvi, 35); the consumption of sacrifices in the wilderness (Lev. ix, 24), at the inauguration of the Temple (2 Chron. vii, 1), and that on Carmel (1 Kings xviii, 38), and when the two companies of fifty were consumed (2 Kings i, 12, 14). Perhaps also Uzzah (2 Sam. vi, 7) may have been struck by lightning. The swallowing up of Dathan, Abiram and their confederates appears to have been by an earthquake, and that, too, might account for the fall of the walls of Jericho and the rending of the Bethel altar (1 Kings xiii, 5). Pestilences, too—such as that at Kibroth-hattaavah (Num. xi, 33), at Shittim (Num. xxv, 9), after David’s numbering of the people (2 Sam. xxiv, 15), and possibly when so many of the Assyrian army perished (2 Kings xix, 35)—are not out of the course of Nature. Nor are deaths caused by wild animals (venomous serpents, Num. xxi, 6; lions, 1 Kings xiii, 24: xx, 36; bears, 2 Kings ii, 24) unaccountable. It was the glint of early sunlight on the water that misled the Moabites and led to their discomfiture (2 Kings iii, 22),

while sheer panic at an imaginary danger caused the unlooked-for raising of the siege of Samaria (2 Kings vii, 6). Thunder at harvest-time in Palestine (1 Sam. xii, 18) is rare, but might occur. Dew is sometimes curiously capricious in settling (Judges vi, 37). The sudden formation of a barrage of debris might stay the waters of Jordan (Joshua iii, 16). Flights of quails in large numbers (Exod. xvi, 13) are not uncommon. An attempt has been made to explain on natural grounds the incident of Beth-horon (Joshua x, 13) by the assertion that it was the darkening, not the standing still, of the sun that was asked for and granted, and another that the going back of the shadow on the dial of Ahaz (2 Kings xx, 11) was due to the upheaval of a flight of steps; but perhaps neither of these is wholly satisfactory.

If, then, so many events usually thought to be miraculous either were, or might have been, effected by purely natural forces, why are they to be considered miracles at all? The time when, and the place where, those forces operated have to be taken into consideration. Was it by mere chance that the heavy rain began to fall, and the oceanic disturbances took place exactly one week after the ark was ready to receive Noah and his companions? or that the fiery destruction of Sodom was delayed until Lot and his daughters had found a safe refuge? How came it that the gulf in the earth opened just where it would swallow up Dathan's company and no others? What caused that "strong east wind" to blow on the very night when the Israelites were hard pressed by the Egyptian forces? Why did the waters only return when the Israelites had safely crossed and yet in time to overwhelm the pursuing enemy? How came the walls of Jericho to stand unshaken for six days and then fall on the seventh when the trumpets sounded and the people shouted? Why did the "fire from heaven" fall on Elijah's sacrifice and not on that of the priests of Baal? Why did sudden death single out the one man who had put out his hand to steady the ark? Similar questions might be asked about all the other happenings, and it is quite too much to suppose they could all be mere coincidences. Besides, some—the Deluge, the flights of quails, the fall of Jericho, the relief of Samaria—were announced beforehand; others—Samuel's thunderstorm, the fire that destroyed Ahaziah's emissaries—came at the call of a man, or came in answer to prayer, as the staying of the sun at Joshua's request, the dew on Gideon's fleece, and the fire that consumed the sacrifice on Carmel. Also, in most cases, a definite purpose was accom-

plished, and these are features that coincidence or chance cannot account for.

A favourite device of those who wish to explain away or minimize the Old Testament miracles is to assert that perfectly natural occurrences have been exaggerated and distorted by the haze of tradition into supernatural events. This procedure is particularly marked in their treatment of the Plagues of Egypt. It is carefully pointed out that each of the Plagues corresponds to some visitation familiar in that country. Thus it is remarked that at the first rise of the Nile in each year the waters are coloured by the red marl brought down from the Abyssinian hills. This is, then, put forward as having been represented as the turning the waters into blood. It does not, however, account for the fish dying, for the water being rendered undrinkable, and especially for all waters, in streams, pools, ponds and even in household vessels of wood or stone, being affected, as well as the water of the Nile. Therefore, these features have to be set down as the embroidery of later tradition. In similar fashion it is urged that incursions of frogs, lice (or sand flies, R.V.), flies and locusts are fairly common, while cattle-plagues and skin-diseases (boils and blains) are not unknown, as also hail and thunderstorms, though these are rare; that the three days' darkness might be due to a sandstorm caused by the hot "Khamseen" wind, and the tenth Plague was a malignant epidemic, afterwards represented by tradition as a slaying of the first-born only.

If that were all, if the Plagues were but ordinary visitations, even though somewhat intensified, how came it that so many followed one after another in such rapid succession? Why were the Egyptians so alarmed, the magicians confounded, and in the end Pharaoh terrified into letting the people go? Why was Goshen repeatedly spared? Especially, how was it that the Plagues were announced beforehand, some coming at a definite signal—striking the water, lifting the hand or rod, scattering ashes—and some removed at Moses' intercession? If the critical suggestions are justified, the actual facts must have been elaborately and systematically falsified in the present narrative.

In much the same way it is put forward that there is a substance known to the Arabs of the Sinaitic region as "manna," which is an exudation from a kind of tamarisk found only in certain parts and at a particular time in the year. "The Arabs gather it in the early morning, boil it down, strain it . . . and keep it in leather

skins : they pour it like honey over their unleavened bread . . . In a cool place it keeps for long.”* To identify this with the manna of Scripture it is necessary to disregard the statements that this fell in double quantity on the sixth day and none on the Sabbath ; that if kept on other days it putrified ; that “ he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack ” (Exod. xvi, 18) ; that the people could bake it, grind it, and make it into cakes ; that it was found in all parts of the wilderness, and that throughout the whole period of forty years. The identification seems precarious.

Again, it has been guessed that the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night (Exod. xiii, 21) may have been suggested by the “ custom of a brazier filled with burning wood being borne along at the head of a caravan of pilgrims.”† Why such a brazier should suggest a pillar of *cloud* is discreetly left unexplained, and certainly it would not account for that pillar removing from the van to the rear so as to come “ between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel ” (Exod. xiv, 20), nor for its guiding the people (Deut. i, 33), nor for its resting on the Tent of Meeting and lifting again when the march was to be resumed.

If the Israelites of a later age really turned such ordinary everyday matters into the marvellous events portrayed they must have had tolerably vivid imaginations, and the historians who set these fantasies down as actual facts must have been strangely credulous. It is easy to talk of traditional embellishment, but the unadorned matter-of-fact way in which they are narrated does not look in the least like it. Compare, for instance, the simplicity of the historical record of the passage of the Red Sea (Exod. xiv, 21–23) with the poetic amplification of it in chap. xv, 4–10, which is admitted to be of comparatively early date (“ not later than the early days of the Davidic dynasty ”).‡

Turning now to the events where any action of natural forces can hardly be in question, it is not likely that water should have been twice procured by striking the solid rock (Exod. xvii, 6 ; Num. xx, 11), or that men dying from the bite of venomous serpents should recover because they merely gazed on the bronze image of one (Num. xxi, 9). No natural force will account for the revival of a child already dead (1 Kings xvii, 22 ; 2 Kings iv, 34), or of a dead corpse on touching the dead bones of another man

* Driver, *Exodus*, p. 153.

† *Ibid.*, p. 113.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

(2 Kings xiii, 21), or for the sudden development of leprosy in an avaricious servant (2 Kings v, 27), and a presumptuous king (2 Chron. xxvi, 19), or the cure of leprosy by bathing seven times in Jordan (2 Kings v, 14). Even if it be possible that the wood of some tree could make bitter water drinkable (Exod. xv, 25), or a little salt cast into a spring of "evil" waters make them wholesome (2 Kings ii, 21), or a handful of meal counteract the effect of a poisonous gourd (2 Kings iv, 41), at any rate, throwing a stick into the water (2 Kings vi, 6) could not make an iron axe-head float. It is not easy to account for "a handful of meal . . . and a little oil" sufficing to feed three persons for a good part of three years (1 Kings xvii, 12, 14), or for the contents of a single pot of oil filling a considerable number of vessels, only exhausted when all were filled (2 Kings iv, 6), or for twenty barley loaves being more than enough to feed one hundred men (2 Kings iv, 42-44). That a man should be possessed of abnormal strength is nothing improbable, but why should it depend on locks unshorn (Judges xvi, 17)? There are those who sneer at the idea of an ass being enabled to speak; but is that really more surprising than the rest of the narrative in which it is found? Balaam was, beyond question, intensely eager to secure the lavish rewards promised by Balak. What made him refuse the first invitation? What checked him on his journey? What induced him to substitute blessings for the curses expected of him? It is surely more difficult to thwart the intentions of a wilful man than to enable a dumb animal to utter intelligible sounds. Where the whole account is one of Divine interposition it is idle to cavil at a detail like this. Consider again the three signs given to Moses (Exod. iv, 2-9). The magicians might be able by a mere trick to make it appear that they had changed what looked like a stick into a snake and back again; but in Moses' case this was impossible. What he had in his hand was a genuine rod, not a hypnotized serpent; nor could it have been any kind of a sign to him unless there was a real transformation. He could hardly have made a mistake about his hand becoming leprous. Even if the changing of the waters of the Nile was no more than the annual reddening, that would not apply to water turning to blood when poured on the dry land. It is said there have been instances of men who have been swallowed by shark or whale and found alive after a considerable lapse of time, and some may think that this may be what happened to Jonah, though even then the presence of the great fish at exactly the right moment, and its

disgorging the prophet just where escape was possible, would need some explaining. That three men, however, could be thrown into a fiery furnace, heated sevenfold, and yet emerge with unsinged garments, and that another could remain among hungry lions for a whole night without hurt, will admit of no such explanation; nor is it conceivable that any natural force could account for "a chariot of fire and horses of fire" parting two friends in order that one of them might be carried up from earth by a whirlwind (2 Kings ii, 11). The confusion of tongues at Babel (Gen. xi, 9) is explicitly attributed to the direct action of the LORD.

Since none of all these events can anyhow be referred to the exaggeration or misunderstanding of natural happenings, those who have made up their minds that miracles cannot take place are reduced to asserting that these incidents never occurred; that the narratives are "legends," "folklore," sheer imagination essentially untrue. If so, what possible value can be attached to the histories containing them?

In the New Testament the same difficulties recur in an even aggravated form. Our Lord Himself appealed to the wonderful works He wrought as evidence of His Mission (John v, 36; x, 38; xiv, 11), and enumerated some of them to the messengers of the Baptist (Matt. xi, 5). Nowadays it is the fashion to discount certain of these by attributing the healing of the sick to unusual personal curative or magnetic powers, while casting out devils is disposed of by simply asserting that there was no such thing as demoniac possession—it was only a popular superstition—and classifying the cases recorded as some form of epilepsy or insanity. There remain, however, many which cannot be so got rid of: such are the turning water into wine; the stilling a storm with a word, and walking upon the water; feeding thousands on scanty provision; healing sick at a distance (the nobleman's son, the centurion's servant, and the Canaanite woman's daughter); healing at a word a helpless paralytic, restoring a withered hand, ten lepers, and one by a touch; contact with a garment stanching a long-standing issue of blood; opening the eyes of the blind, especially of one born blind; and raising the dead (Jairus' daughter, the widow's son at Nain, and Lazarus). There are also the portents at the Crucifixion; the mysterious darkness, the rending of the Veil, and the opening of the graves. Above all, there are the three transcendent miracles connected with Himself: His Birth, His Resurrection, and His Ascension. All these, then, if miracles

be impossible, would have to be put down to the vain imaginings of over-credulous disciples, and so also the comparatively few marvels ascribed to Apostles in the book of the Acts : the healing of the lame at the Beautiful Gate and at Lystra ; the fate of Ananias and Sapphira, and the blinding of Elymas ; the cure of palsied Æneas and of Publius' father ; the opening of prison doors, twice at Jerusalem and again at Philippi ; the expelling of the spirit of divination from the Philippian damsel, and the immunity from the viper's bite ; the healing power of even Peter's shadow, and Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons, and his casting out of evil spirits which led the sons of Sceva to try and emulate him ; and the reviving of the dead, Dorcas and Eutychus. Altogether, though the miracles in Scripture are not so numerous as is sometimes imagined, yet if everything of the kind has to be discredited, it is evident a good deal of the Biblical history will have to be regarded as hopelessly unreliable.

When so much is put down to the influence of tradition and legend, it has to be borne in mind that this largely depends on the truth of certain modern theories. As to the Pentateuch, the view now so vehemently advocated of its composite origin claims an interval of centuries between the actual events and the records ; but if the age-long belief in its Mosaic origin holds good, the records are nearly contemporary, and the distorting effect of tradition is excluded. Much the same may be said of what is recorded in Joshua and Judges and the books of Samuel. Moreover, if the inclusion of miracles is chiefly due to the growth of tradition, then they ought to be found most frequently in the earliest ages, and yet it is precisely in Genesis that few are found. Next to Exodus and Numbers, miracles are most abundant in the books of Kings. These may have been compiled at a comparatively late date, but they are evidently based on much older records, and there is nothing to show that these did not contain the miraculous as well as the ordinary events. Also it is to be noted that in these books miracles are chiefly connected with the times of Elijah and Elisha, well on in historic times, and, indeed, far more with the latter name. It is surely to be expected that legends and traditions would have collected more about the striking figure of the Tishbite than about his less notable successor, yet the contrary is the case. For the New Testament events there is scarcely any room for the growth of legend or tradition. Three of the Gospels were already written within some thirty years of the events, two of them probably containing the reminiscences of

eye-witnesses, and the third compiled by one who had made careful enquiry of those who were eye-witnesses ; the book of the Acts was written at a still shorter interval after the events recorded in it ; the fourth Gospel, perhaps, some forty years later still, and probably by one who was himself an eye-witness.

Of course, we cannot expect to find accounts of miraculous events in the non-historical parts of the Bible, but what we do find is allusions to many of those events in many of the Psalms, in the prophetic writings, and in the Epistles, and always alluded to as actual occurrences. Above all, our Lord Himself endorses many in like manner, including some of the most disputed.

As has already been remarked, the Biblical miraculous events are mainly grouped about three memorable epochs—an evidence surely of design and purpose ; but if we extend our definition of “ miracle ” to include all indications of God’s intervention in the affairs of men, we shall have to include a great deal more than the actual “ signs and portents.” There are the various appearances : that at the burning bush ; the great manifestation at Sinai ; the revelation to Moses when “ the LORD passed before him ” (Exod. xxxiv, 6) ; the appearances of “ the glory of the LORD ” in the wilderness, at the Tabernacle, and in the Temple, besides the departure of the glory witnessed by Ezekiel ; the visit of the LORD to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom, that of the Captain of the LORD’s Host to Joshua, and those of the Angel of the LORD to Balaam, Gideon and Manoah, to Zachariah and Mary ; the manifestations at our Lord’s Baptism and the Transfiguration ; and the appearance of our Lord to Saul on the Damascus road. Then there is the selection of individuals for special purposes : the call of Abram, the mission of Moses, the choice of David, the nomination of Elisha and Jehu, the commission of Jeremiah, the Apostles, and St. Paul ; and of non-Israelites—Hazeal, Cyrus, Nebuchadnezzar, and Artaxerxes. With these may be classed the exceptional births of Isaac, Samuel, and John the Baptist. Again, there are the notifications of the Divine Will and Purpose : the dreams of Abimelech, Joseph, Pharaoh, Solomon, and Nebuchadnezzar ; the visions vouchsafed to Abram (in the horror of thick darkness), to Jacob twice at Bethel, to Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, St. Peter at Joppa, to St. Paul on more than one occasion, and to St. John at Patmos, and in the writing on the wall which startled Belshazzar. The incursions of the Assyrians (1 Chron. v, 26 ; Isa. xxxvii, 26),

and of the Babylonians and other nations (2 Kings xxiv, 3) are declared to be according to the will of the LORD, and it is He who would bring against unfaithful Israel "a nation from far, from the end of the earth" (Deut. xxviii, 49, 50). Prediction, especially of distant events, can but come from Him who alone can declare "the end from the beginning" (Isa. xlvi, 10). Indeed, in a sense it may be said that the purport of the whole Bible is to show that "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men" (Dan. iv, 32), guiding and over-ruling the destinies of nations and all mankind.

There are two assertions which are often put forward as arguments to show that miracles cannot possibly happen :—

(1) *They are contrary to experience.*

If that means contrary to *all* experience, then it simply assumes the very thing that has to be proved, namely, that all the records which assert that such events have actually occurred are false. That they should be outside ordinary experience is a matter of necessity, for unless they were rare they could not be "signs and portents," which is the very thing they are intended to be.

(2) *They are contrary to the laws of Nature.*

But we are far from knowing all the laws of Nature ; there are many which we are only just beginning to find out. Moreover, what we call the laws of Nature are only our own generalizations from our experience of how Nature ordinarily works.

However, the argument is sometimes differently stated, thus : The laws of Nature are God's laws, and, therefore, He would not contravene them or allow them to be contravened. Certainly, not without good reason. The most stringent of human laws may be modified or set aside in cases of emergency. How much more, then, may the Ruler of all things modify or suspend His own rules if He sees reason for so doing ? People sometimes talk as though God could not work a miracle—as though He has not the power to do so. Take, then, what I suppose would be considered the most startling of miracles—the raising of the dead. If God is (as all who believe in the living God will admit) the Source and Fountain of all life, if it is He who gives life at birth or at the germination of seed, what is there to hinder Him from giving back life to that which has died, as in the case of the blossoming of Aaron's rod ?

After all, if a miracle means a wonder-work wrought by God what marvel is there so stupendous as Creation? The most startling of the phenomena which men may deem incredible sinks into insignificance compared with the mighty achievement of bringing into existence the whole Universe: the starry heavens with their myriads of shining worlds that so truly "declare the glory of God"; yea, even this world of ours, so tiny by comparison, yet so perfectly finished in all its bewildering variety that the microscope shows as many marvels of skill and wisdom in the realm of the infinitely little as the telescope and spectroscope find in the realm of the infinitely great.

Then alongside of this is the no less mighty work of Redemption. The bringing in of Life Eternal through a shameful death; the purchase of infinite joy through suffering unfathomable; the conquest of the terrific forces of evil by quiet patient endurance; the effecting so mighty a purpose as the salvation of a whole world by such seemingly inadequate means; these surely form a work as stupendous as Creation itself. Truly "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. i, 25).

Even that is not all. There is still to come the wonder of the New Creation, when we are bidden to expect "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. iii, 13), where the moral and spiritual miracle transcends even that of a physical Creation.

It were folly to doubt that the wisdom and power displayed in the Creator's work must have a worthy purpose and meaning far beyond our limited understanding, and it is Scripture alone which indicates to us something of that meaning and purpose. What, then, is this Scripture? It is made up of the utterances and writings of many men of the most varying ranks and character living in widely differing circumstances and in different ages spread over many centuries. The contents are miscellaneous in form: history, biography, poetry, pithy sayings, letters, visions. Yet the amazing thing is that these combine to form a distinct unity. That unity chiefly consists in tracing the working out of God's purposes from the very beginning to the yet distant end, from Creation through Redemption to the New Creation, the "restitution of all things." It is but a small volume compared with the ponderous tomes setting forth the theories, philosophies, researches of men. Yet in it what wealth of wisdom, what incentives to holiness, what treasures of hope and faith, what a

revelation of the love of God ! Can we doubt that this is a work of God, though carried out by human agents, instinct with the most profound meaning and purpose ?

Holy Scripture is itself a Miracle.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN said : What is a miracle ? A miracle is “ an extraordinary phenomenon, wrought by supernatural and Divine interposition.” Such were the miracles wrought by our Divine Saviour as expressed in His own words to the disciples of John the Baptist : “ Go and tell John the things which ye hear and see : the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.” Specimens of these miracles proper are given in detail in the Gospel narratives. Such was St. Matthew’s statement that He “ went about in all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness among the people.” These accounts are confirmed by eye-witnesses and contemporaries.

In regard to the third Evangelist, *St. Luke*, we must remember that he was a *trained physician*. His testimony, therefore, is the testimony of a man of science. For instance, when St. Luke tells us of the healing of a *fever* (iv, 38, 39) he uses the technical term for “ a violent fever ” (*puretô megalô*). His testimony, therefore, is that of one who knew what fevers were, and what the healing of them meant. This consideration is very valuable in reference to the miracles recorded by him of St. Paul in the latter part of the Acts. It should always be remembered that they are recorded by a physician who was an eye-witness of them.

On the question of the abstract *possibility of miracles*, we know very well that a man may, in general, act uniformly according to a certain rule, and yet, on a particular occasion, may, for a special reason, act quite differently. We cannot, therefore, refuse to admit the possibility of something analogous taking place as regards the action of the *Supreme Being*. If we imagine the Laws of Nature to be self-existent and uncaused, then we cannot admit any deviation from them. But if we think of them as designed by a *Supreme Will*, then we must allow the possibility of their being on some particular

occasion *suspended*. Or, it may be, without their being suspended, some different law may be brought into action, whereby the result in question is brought about without *any suspension* taking place.

Now, if there are agencies and forces in existence outside the ordinary world of Nature, and if they can, under certain circumstances, interpose in it, they must necessarily produce effects inconsistent with the processes of that world when left to itself. Life under the surface of the water has a certain course of its own when undisturbed, but if a man standing on a bank throws a stone into it, effects are produced as unexpected and unaccountable as a miracle to the creatures who live in the stream. The life in the world of air above the water is perfectly distinct from the life in the world under the water. Now, the spiritual world may be as close to us as the air to the water; and the angels, or other ministers of God's will, may as easily at His word interpose in it as a man can throw a stone into the water. Thus, when the stone is so thrown, there is no suspension on modification of any law; it is simply, as in the case of a miracle, that a new agency has interposed. Thus, in the miracle proper, it is shown that some power outside Nature has intervened, and this is borne out by the words of Holy Scripture: "God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will."

The whole significance of our Lord's miracles is, that they occur at His word and in obedience to His command, "What manner of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey Him." Thus our Lord proved that He was a Saviour by doing the works of a saviour. There is no word for "Saviour" in the Roman language. The ancients knew of a "*servator*" but not of a "*salvator*." The essential message of the miracles is that they exhibit our Lord in this character: that of One who has both the will and the power to save.

Thus, too, the miracles of the Old Testament are obviously wrought as manifestations of a Divine Being and as evidences of His character and will. Such were the miracles wrought for Israel's deliverance from the bondage of Egypt—miracles which will be repeated in the future during the Day of the Lord and the future period of Judgment. Without the miracles in the Wilderness, the God of the Jews would

be an abstraction: as manifested in them, He is the living God with a revealed character—"a Just God and a Saviour" (Isa. xlv, 21). The subsequent miracles of Jewish History reveal more and more both of the will and the power of God.

The *greatest miracle is Prophecy*, and its chief value is this: that it stands ever before our sight. Every time we meet a Jew we behold a miracle. It is now about 2,500 years ago since Amos wrote: "Thus saith the Lord, I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth." How has this been accomplished? Is there a nation upon earth among whom the Jews have not been sifted? Is there a nation where the Jews, being so sifted, *have been lost*? Why, then, should we dispute about miracles? "A miracle is merely a Divine working beyond and above what we call 'the laws of Nature,'" and every time we behold a Jew we behold such a Divine operation.

But the single case of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ—a wonderful miracle—governs all others. This one miracle has occurred; there can be no reason for doubting the occurrence of ten or one hundred. St. Paul very reasonably rests the whole truth of Christianity upon the miracle of the Resurrection: "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins." But he convincingly shows that the truth of this miracle is abundantly established. "He was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve; after that he was seen of five hundred brethren at once; after that of James; then of all the Apostles." And then he adds, "of me also, as of one born out of due time." Paul's own conversion was in itself a miracle, *i.e.* a fact wholly supernatural. He went forth on his journey to Damascus—no one disputes the fact—a bitter persecutor: he came to Damascus a believer in Christ. He could not be otherwise. That same Jesus whom he had persecuted, and whom he had believed to be then lying in the tomb, had appeared to him, spoken to him, and in one moment subdued him. He could no longer doubt the fact that Jesus was his risen Lord. All the Apostles "with great power gave witness of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus." Seven or eight of them have left us their testimony in writing. The Church of Christ was built upon this fact. Was it a mistake? Was it a fraud? Could it be a fraud? Religious

impostures there have been many ; but in every such case the object and drift have been evident. Men will do much, invent much, suffer much, and lie much to gain honour, wealth, and power ; but who ever heard of men who committed frauds merely to involve themselves in all kinds of trouble ? This great fact was proclaimed everywhere in the Augustan age and in the centre of Greek and Roman civilization. To declare it involved the preacher in disgrace and persecution ; yet perseveringly it was proclaimed, *and never was it disproved*. Before this preaching the reigning faiths of the heathen world fell and vanished away.

On the whole, miracles, far from being an excrescence on Christian faith, are indissolubly bound up with it, and all have a complete unity in the manifestation of the Divine Nature as recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

Mr. W. HOSTE asked the lecturer whether, there having been in sacred history, as stated on p. 99, special miracle eras—a fact he believed to be as true as interesting—might explain our Lord's words, "These signs shall follow them that believe," etc. ? (Mark xvi, 17, 18). The said signs confessedly have never been general to Christian experience. Is this to be explained, as is sometimes done, by a decline of faith ? If so, why in the case of the Apostles did miracles appear to become less frequent as the years passed ? For example, no deliverance, as in chaps. xii and xvi, is granted to Paul from the prison-house in Rome. Is not the real explanation that this promise belongs properly to the miracle-era of the opening of the Christian testimony ?

The principle on p. 101 is very important, that natural processes were often utilized for the performing of miracles (though, of course, not of all), and that what seemed like the violation of law was only the bringing in of some other more recondite law, prepared for such a contingency. He remembered, in 1910, being shown a well in India, in the compound of a missionary, in so unlikely a spot that when it was proposed to dig there, an Indian water-expert had said that "if water was found there, he would become a Christian." The missionary, however, had, as he believed, been shown the spot in answer to prayer. An abundant supply was found, issuing from what seemed like a fault in the geological formation. It was

in a small triangular tongue of land between two Indian compounds, at only two or three yards' distance on either side, the owners of which began digging for all they were worth, hoping to tap the unexpected supply, but neither got a drop! Who can say that this had not been provided for beforehand by an Omniscient God?

The miracles of our Lord were, as Mr. Finn points out on p. 101, "for effecting some worthy purpose," in contrast to the pseudo-miracles which superstition attributes to His childhood, which were arbitrary, if not mischievous. Our Lord steadily refused "the sign from Heaven," which will be given by the Antichrist (*see* Rev. xiii), which latter shows that miracles *per se* are not proofs of divine power. Why, if our Lord's miracles were unreal, could the Jewish teachers ascribe *them* to Satan, when, as in the case of the raising of Lazarus, they resulted in the conversion of many to God, and the discomfiture of Satan? The words of Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Take away the miracles, and you will have the world at the feet of Jesus Christ," are based on a fallacy, for our Lord's credentials, as Messiah, were in part His miracles (*e.g.* Isa. lxi, 1-10—a passage omitted from the Synagogue lectionary as only suitable for the Messiah's lips). Had there been nothing miraculous in the ministry of One professing to be the Incarnate Son of God, would not the unbeliever to-day have a strong argument against His superhuman claims? Certainly, and he would not hesitate to use it.

The Rev. J. J. B. COLES said: We all recognize the great value and importance of the scholarly paper to which we have listened. Would that it could be widely circulated among those who have any doubts as to the miraculous in Holy Scripture! All God's works and ways are wonderful, and so are His living oracles in the written Word.

Mr. AVARY H. FORBES said: The miracles, both of the Old Testament and the New, were *physical* miracles almost exclusively. After our Lord's ascension, spiritual miracles began with the descent of the Holy Ghost, the conversion of St. Paul and of many others; and these miracles have never ceased. Little attention is usually paid to them in the matter of Christian evidence, yet they are by far the most convincing factor. It is strange that they have received so little attention, seeing that our Lord attached such importance to

them ; for, in speaking of His own (physical) miracles, He said about His followers : " Greater works than these shall he do ; because I go unto My Father." The after effects of raising Lazarus from the dead were as nothing, compared with the world-wide and age-long effects of the conversion of St. Paul.

Mr. SIDNEY COLLETT said : According to my experience, in most cases the real trouble with those who question the miraculous in the Bible is not a mental or intellectual difficulty, but rather it is a matter of the heart. In other words, most of the objections were raised by those who wanted to find excuses for their neglect of the Bible with its teaching and its claim upon them. On the other hand, those who had experienced in their hearts and lives the greatest miracle of all, viz., conversion, found no difficulty whatever in accepting those miracles recorded in the Bible. To illustrate this, he told of a drunken man who had spent all his money, and even sold all his furniture, in order to buy *beer*. And " when he had spent all " he was led into a mission-hall, heard the Gospel, and was saved. He at once became an abstainer, got good employment in course of time, and was able to get together and furnish a comfortable home. Then, on one occasion, when reading his Bible, an unbelieving critic sneered at him, saying, " Surely he did not believe in the story about Christ turning water into wine ! " But the converted drunkard replied by saying, " Of course I believe it ; you come down to my little cottage, and you shall see how God can change beer into furniture."

Mr. L. BIDDULPH said : As a child, I always considered miracles as inexplicable events, and even as contradictions of the laws governing Nature, and I believe I am not far wrong in ascribing this view to the majority of Christians. It is since our general knowledge of the laws of Nature has been so largely extended, that a disbelief in miracles contradicting and upsetting the laws of the cosmos has arisen. And to this new outlook must be attributed the attitude of the modern critics toward miracles, and especially to miracles based on the old conception of something *contrary* to the laws of the cosmos.

Our lecturer, in the course of his paper, mentioned, among other miracles, the demolition of the walls of Jericho as a result of the

investment of that town by Joshua, and suggests that it was caused by a miraculous earthquake. With our present-day knowledge (scientific), however, we cannot help assigning this miraculous happening to another cause, which, although it is not perhaps so astonishing to us, because we understand how it was brought about, yet it is nevertheless miraculous in its effects. I refer to the principle of disintegration brought about by repeated and strong vibrations of a particular note. A reading of the passage in question will make this clear. The whole army was to march round the city headed by seven priests blowing seven rams-horn trumpets. The vibrations set up by the steady march of the troops must have been very great. It is well known that a regiment has to break step when crossing a bridge (suspension) or it will be broken. This measure repeated for seven days, and repeated seven times on the seventh day, accompanied by the shouting of the whole encampment, completed the work of destruction at the appointed time.

A wall has been brought down by a prolonged musical note played by a military band since Joshua's time, and to the great confusion and astonishment of the unwary bandsmen. Caruso, the great tenor, was able to shatter a wine-glass in fragments by singing a prolonged note into the glass! In fact, everything and every individual has its keynote, and if that keynote be sounded a sufficient number of times and with sufficient strength, material disintegration of that thing or person will ensue. This knowledge does not, however, destroy the miraculous nature of such an event.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION.

Mr. F. C. WOOD wrote: I do not understand the mentality of those who try to explain so many miraculous events by natural causes. The only reasonable way to treat such events is to take them as actual happenings, brought about by "the finger of God," or, failing that, to discard them altogether; and then, what kind of book would the Bible be?

The Bible, almost from beginning to end, has special relation to the Jewish people; and that people had a miraculous beginning in life from the dead. The miracles of the Bible were nearly all in connection with Israel, both before, during, and after the ministry of Christ. They have been for over 1,850 years a miraculously

preserved and separated people ; and they are yet to be dealt with even more miraculously, and the preparation for these events is taking place before our eyes to-day.

It would need another paper to go into the detail, which can be gathered from the Bible, as to *why* and *how* many of the miracles occurred, and *what* purpose they served ; and criticism is not fair or just that does not take these things fully into account. May I refer to a few of the most important events ? The Deluge was sent because of the iniquity of the whole world, a condition of things so bad that probably the bodies as well as the minds of the race—Noah and his family alone excepted—were so affected, that God was compelled to destroy the race from the earth. The language used indicates this. That the Deluge did occur, is clearly stated in several parts of Scripture—once with the solemn oath of Jehovah Himself in the following words : “ This is as the waters of Noah unto Me : for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth ; so have I sworn, that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee ” (Isa. liv, 9). How it occurred and the purpose it served is explicitly stated.

The miracle of the birth of Isaac, following upon God’s covenant promise (Abraham being then one hundred years old, and Sarah ninety years), was to indicate for all time to “ the heirs of promise ” that righteousness was to be by grace, through faith, and not by works, according to what had been spoken, “ I have made thee a father of many nations ; before Him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, ‘ So shall thy seed be ’ ” (Rom. iv, 17, 18). It was a question with Abraham, and all his spiritual seed, of faith in God’s promises, even to life from the dead.

The passing of Israel through the Red Sea was not only to deliver that helpless people, but was for the purpose, as stated in the words, “ I will get Me honour upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen ; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.” It was also to be a matter of remembrance for Israel for all time. The sevenfold details of *how* it was done are given in Exod. xiv, 19–29. All is so plain that a child may understand.

As regards Israel crossing the Jordan, the reason *why* is given as, that the people might know that the living God was among them, and that He would without fail drive out from before them the seven powerful, idolatrous nations which were in the land. It was also that the new commander, Joshua, "might be magnified in the sight of all Israel," and that in after days the descendants of these men and "all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord that it is mighty." An immediate result was the terrifying effect it had on the nations on the western side of Jordan. *How* the miracle was wrought is plainly recorded: "The waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan; and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, the salt sea, failed, and were cut off." Then, when the feet of the priests were lifted up unto the dry land, the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as they did before. The operating cause of these two outstanding miracles is stated in the question and answer given in Ps. cxiv: "What aileth thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back? . . . Tremble thou earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob." In the first case, this presence was manifested in the miraculous pillar of cloud and fire, connected with which was "the Angel of the Lord," and in the second by "the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord," "the Lord of all the earth," with which was associated the Shekinah glory, this also being miraculous.

This naturally leads to the miracles of Christ. On two occasions, He walked on the water and stilled the tempest with a word. If we reverently ask *how* this was done, the only answer can be, by His inherent power as Lord of creation, the Lord of winds and waters. And if we ask *why*, the all-sufficient reply is in His own words: "The works that I do bear witness of Me that the Father hath sent Me."

It is an ominous sign of the trend of things in these days that so many Biblical subjects are given up to criticism under the name of scholarship and intellectuality, and that so many are influenced by this show of learning, when a careful and reverent reading of the portions criticized would not only reveal the hollowness of the criticism but magnify the truth of the things revealed. Only five miracles

have been mentioned in these remarks, but many others might be dealt with to show *why* and *how* the miracles occurred, and *what* purpose they served.

I was much interested in Mr. Finn's remarks about certain periods of Jewish history being noted for miraculous events, while for long periods they were unknown. These periods of miracles were mainly forty or fifty years at the commencement of Israel's national history ; the times of Elijah (seven miracles) and Elisha (fourteen miracles), that being a time of great national declension ; and during the ministry of Christ and His Apostles, a period of about fifty years also, when God was seeking to bring Israel back to national repentance. During the present long dispensation of about 1,850 years we have had the standing miracle of the Word of God, and this probably accounts for what is termed "the silence of God," though, where prayer is definitely answered, God is not silent, and there is then that which partakes of the nature of miracle.

AUTHOR'S REPLY.

There is not much criticism for me to reply to.

Mr. Biddulph considers that the fall of the walls of Jericho was due to the vibration set up by the blowing of the trumpets and the shout of the people. If so, it was no miracle and there was no need to discuss it.

I quite agree with Mr. Avary Forbes, that spiritual miracles are really more important than physical ; but since it is precisely the physical that are objected to and discredited, it was more necessary to consider them.

Mr. Hoste asked why there are fewer miracles in the later part of St. Paul's life, attributed by some teachers to some supposed weakening of faith ? Actually we have little information as to his later years ; but if there were fewer miracles, then I should certainly not attribute that to any lack of faith, but to the passing of the miracle-*era*.

The point in the Chairman's remarks about the possibility of angelic activities in the spiritual plane is of special interest to me. Our word "angel" and the Greek from which it is derived merely indicates a messenger. The Hebrew name, however, is connected with *malaakhah*, meaning "work." This suggests that the angels are

active workers, and, both in the Old Testament and in the Apocalypse, there are hints of angels controlling natural forces (*e.g.* wind, fire, etc.). Does not this afford a reasonable explanation of miracles? An illustration I have elsewhere used is that of a great ocean liner, where for days and days the work goes on with unfailing regularity: the engineers keep up the required speed, the steersman has his prescribed course, the crew have their appointed duties. Then something happens: someone falls overboard. The captain at once issues fresh orders, the vessel circles round, the engines are stopped, a boat is lowered, the ordinary routine is interfered with. In like manner, if what we call the laws of Nature are in reality the rules governing the normal activities of subordinate angelic agents, then for some particular purpose those activities may be suspended or diverted at the Will of the Supreme Ruler.