

The Most Reverend A.M. Ramsay, *Christianity and the Supernatural*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 5 March 1963. London: The Athlone Press, 1963. Pbk. pp.14.

Christianity and the Supernatural

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The Ethel M. Wood Lecture
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Amid all the points of contrast between the Bible and the outlook of the modern world none is perhaps greater than that which is provided by the miraculous element in the Biblical narratives. In this lecture on the Ethel M. Wood foundation which it is my great privilege to be giving in the University I do no more than try to clarify some of the questions which arise concerning the miracles in the Gospels in relation to divine revelation. If I set the questions in a wide context it is because I think that only in that wide context are the questions intelligible at all.

I

Ninety-eight years ago James B. Mozley, the Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford, gave a series of Bampton lectures with the title *On Miracles*. It was his thesis that miracles are the necessary guarantee of divine revelation. Since revelation means a communication from God to man it is important to be certain that statements which claim to be revelation, as for instance the teachings of Christ and the apostles, are without doubt given from God. The necessary proof of this is available when the teaching is accompanied by miracles; it is these which guarantee the claim of the words to be revelation. Thus, while revelation is in its content beyond reason, the presence of miracle alone makes our acceptance of it rational. The Mohammedan is irrational in that he accepts the Prophet's assertions unattested; indeed

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Mozley goes so far as to say that because of the absence of miracles in his religious scheme the Mohammedan 'shews an utterly barbarous idea of evidence and a total miscalculation of the claims of reason which unfits his religion for an enlightened age and people'.¹

Today exceedingly few, if any, exponents either of the concept of revelation or of the gospels would put the matter in that way. Indeed in 1865 this view of miracle was already becoming obsolescent, and its publication by J. B. Mozley seems now to have been rather a rearguard

¹ J.B. Mozley, *On Miracles*, p. 31.

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action on behalf of a view more characteristic of the eighteenth century, wherein both the great Bishop Butler and the well-known Archdeacon Paley had successively held it. If today a different view of miracle dominates the theological scene it is partly because a more scientific study of the gospels shews that the gospels themselves do not present the miracles in purely evidential terms, and partly because the supernatural is understood in a way significantly different from the way in which Mozley understood it.

What do we understand by the supernatural? ‘Well,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘when I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean.’ Anyhow some word is required to express the phenomena inherent in the divine activity in the world, if there is a living God who has a dynamic relation to the world and to human beings, and if providence, grace and revelation have any place at all. Divine grace is the most intelligible illustration. If God acts upon human beings so as to have moral and spiritual, and perhaps physical, effects upon them, if divine grace can create saintly lives, if sacraments are divine operations for the believer’s good, then the word supernatural serves to express this. Within the wide phenomenon of the supernatural, and just how wide it would be hard to dogmatize, the miraculous as Christian tradition knows it is but one element. The supernatural need not in its

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actions override the known laws of nature, but when it does so the further, specific term ‘miracle’ becomes appropriate. It is not the only mode of the supernatural, and the supernatural includes not only events like the raising of Lazarus from death but also events like the turning of Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Christian or like the sacraments wherein divine grace does not annul nature so much as use nature for moral ends.

There is therefore a big difference between the view of miracle which isolates it as Butler, Paley and Mozley did, and the view which sees it in a context of the supernatural more widely understood. That the former view yielded place within the nineteenth century was due, I think, not only to trends in philosophy and Biblical study but also to religious movements. Religious movements as different as the revivalism of John Wesley, the romanticism of Coleridge, and the sacramentalism of the Tractarians had a share in setting miracle in the wider context, for all these religious teachers were conscious of analogies between miracle and the work of grace in human lives. To John Wesley the works of Christ were continued in the greater works done by the disciples; and Wesley says, ‘the change wrought by the Holy Spirit in the heart is equivalent to all outward miracles, as implying the self-same power which gave sight to the blind, feet to the lame and life to the dead’.² As to evidences this experiential approach sees the supernatural as significantly in divine grace in the soul as in external miracles, and belief in revelation owes as much to the one kind of evidence as to the other.

² Wesley, *Sermons*, 1825 edition, i, 234.

Let it however be said that this latter conception, new as it was to a certain scholastic tradition, was far from new in the history of Christendom. The ancient Fathers had delighted to trace the analogies of miracle in the souls of Christians. St. Augustine saw miracle not only there, but in nature too. 'Though these miracles of nature be no longer admired,

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yet ponder them wisely, and they are more astonishing than the strangest: for man himself is a greater miracle than all he can work.'³ And when we go back to the New Testament we find the same conception. The Holy Spirit, who is Himself the essence of the supernatural in the experience of the apostolic Church, is made known miraculously in the rushing wind, the fiery tongues, the speaking with tongues on the day of Pentecost: but no less significantly when St. Paul says that 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance'⁴; and whereas he claims himself to be highly competent in one of the supernatural gifts called 'speaking with tongues', he names love to be the greatest of them all.⁵

So too in the gospels the miracles are seen not as an isolated intrusion of divine power, but against a wide and continuous background of divine power—of the supernatural. To Jesus God is everywhere at work. Nature is the perpetual scene of the providential actions of His intimate fatherly care, and the disciples are bidden to have their eyes open to God's graciousness and God's demands thereby conveyed. No less vividly is God at work in history, especially in the history and the scriptures of the chosen people. So too it is of God's power that proud men can become like little children, that Simon Peter is given a gift of faith coming not from flesh and blood but from the Father in heaven, that everything will be given to the man who prays in faith. Indeed it is doubtful whether the man who is blind to the divine working in familiar things will benefit from the most startling miracle. 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.'⁶

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II

So we turn now to examine the gospels again, to see how the evangelists present the miracles and what meaning they assign to them and believe that Jesus assigned to them.

(1) The Synoptists first. The miracles wrought by Jesus are called not 'wonders' but 'works'. Specifically they are works of the Kingdom, or reign of God.

³ *De Civitate Dei*, x. 12.

⁴ Gal. v. 22.

⁵ 1 Cor. xii. 31.

⁶ Luke xvi. 31.

Jesus preaches in Galilee that the reign of God is imminent, indeed present already. The reign is set forth in the righteousness which Jesus teaches, and the childlike and the penitent can receive it. The reign is also set forth in the works which Jesus does. 'If I by the spirit of God cast out devils, then is the kingdom of God come upon you.'⁷ 'Go, and shew John those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them; and blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me.'⁸ The works declare the range of God's reign as by them Jesus, so to say, wages war against the things in human life which are contrary to it: sickness, maiming, blindness, deafness, disease, possession by devils, mental disorder, hunger. The reign of God is to be a divine order in which these ills are overcome, and the purpose of God is to be supreme in human life, bodily as well as moral, and in nature too. The not infrequent allusions to Old Testament scenes and Old Testament imagery in the miracle narratives connect them with the idea of prophecy fulfilled and the breaking in of the long-expected messianic age. 'Today is the scripture fulfilled in your ears.'⁹

Yet emphatically the new order to which the miracles

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belong is no less an order of righteousness, and none of its mighty works takes precedence before the exposure of sin and the bringing of forgiveness. Intermingled with the episodes of miracle are the episodes of forgiveness and the proclamations of righteousness, and in one arresting story which includes both themes—the story of the paralytic in Mark ii—it is the issue of sin and righteousness which is made paramount.¹⁰ It is this interaction between the works and the righteousness which seems to account for the reserve and the withdrawal which so strangely cut across the healing ministry of Jesus. He cannot allow Himself to become merely the popular healer and the purveyor of comfort: to act thus would be to distort the Kingdom of God. Hence the withdrawals; and hence too the vigorous pressing home of the righteousness of the Kingdom, the need for men to repent and become like little children, the possibility of forgiveness, the calls to renunciation. What are we to infer? The physical benefits of the Kingdom are not ends in themselves, but are always subordinate to the divine righteousness. To be healthy, to walk, to hear, to see are not ends in themselves but aspects of a life in which the will of God is done. Just as in our preliminary definition the miraculous is but one fragment of the supernatural, so in the gospels the works of Jesus are but one fragment of something greater and more elusive: a reign of righteousness reaching beyond the confines of this world.

What happened? The issues of righteousness being paramount the ministry of the works gave place to the journey to Jerusalem to die. 'The Son of Man must suffer.' This was however no setback or defeat, no abandonment of the reign of God. Rather was the death of the Christ on

⁷ Matt. xii. 28, cf. Luke xi. 20.

⁸ Matt. xi. 4-5, cf. Luke vii. 22-23.

⁹ Luke iv. 21.

¹⁰ Mark ii. 1-12.

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Calvary to be the Kingdom's mightiest work of all—as yet. Fulfilling prophecy and forming the basis of a new covenant, the death of Jesus was to be the instrument for the conquest of evil and

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the coming of the reign in power. Already we almost hear the strains: 'Sing my tongue the glorious battle.'

Such is the place of the miracles in the story and the teaching of Jesus as the Synoptists present it. Let me add a note by way of an aside. There has been a view that the miracles are to be seen as acts of Man, with Faith as the key to them, as if to say that Jesus shews that where faith is present, Man can subdue nature and conquer pain. What Jesus did all men could do, if only they have faith enough. This was the thesis of a book popular a generation or so ago, D. S. Cairns' *The Faith that Rebels*. On this view I would say only that the connection of the miracles with the humanity of Jesus may be entirely correct. Those who hold Him to be divine have no concern to deny that it was in and through humanity and its limitations that the life was lived and the works were done. Yet a close examination of the word faith in the synoptic gospels shews, I think, that the faith evoked by Jesus is not a faith in man's power to do miracles or to work cures, but a faith in Jesus as the bringer of the reign of God. It is a response to Him, not a response to a belief that man in general could control nature if he had faith enough.

(2) Now we turn to the Fourth Gospel. Here at first sight the reader feels a contrast. The reserve and restraint connected with the miracles in the Synoptists seem at first to be absent. The descriptions of the miraculous seem more stupendous. The evidential motif is more conspicuous, for the miracles avowedly shew forth the glory of the Son of God. 'This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and he manifested his glory, and his disciples believed on him.'¹¹ Yet closer reading considerably modifies the impression of contrast between the Synoptists and John. There are in John's narrative traces of a restraint which is eventually to dominate. Twice does Jesus imply that to be impressed by miracles is not the most understanding kind of faith.¹² And

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the disciples are perplexed that the manifestation of Jesus which He predicts beyond the Passion will not be external for the world to see, but internal to the consciousness of the disciples who love Him.¹³ Now the crux about the miracles in the Johannine story is this. They are indeed evidences of the glory of the Son of God, but the essence of that glory is deeply ethical: it is the self-giving love of the Father and Son being wrought out in history. Hence faith in it is not easy, despite the miracles of Jesus. Just as in the Synoptists the works belong to a reign of God bound up with God's righteousness and leading on to the Cross, so in John the works are part of a glory, bound up with the divine love and leading on to the Cross as its final manifestation.

¹¹ John ii. 11.

¹² Cf. John iv. 48, John xiv. 11.

¹³ Cf. John xiv. 22-23.

It is however in his presentation of the works as signs that John most signally interprets the tradition. In the earlier gospels the works are not called signs, for 'signs' is used of the kind of vulgar display which people asked for and Jesus deprecated as the desire of an evil and adulterous generation. Yet the reader of the story of the feeding of the five thousand easily feels that here is a symbol of a greater heavenly feeding. And it is hard not to see symbol in the story, told as it is by St. Mark with down-to-earth factuality, of how blind Bartimaeus when his eyes had been opened sees and follows Jesus in the way. John explicitly presents the miracles as signs disclosing the various aspects of Jesus in His mission to the human race. He is Himself the Bread from heaven, the Light of blind humanity, the bringer of Life to the dead. The story of the healing of the man born blind runs on to the terrible climax of the moral blindness of the Pharisees; 'because ye say, we see, your sin remains'.¹⁴

To sum up then, the gospels present miracles as evidential indeed, but evidential with a very big difference. Their thesis is not: miracles happened therefore Jesus is divine.

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The miracles partly revealed Jesus for what He is, but partly also baffled because they were bound up with a righteousness and a glory which are seen to involve the Cross. The belief of the disciples first in the Messiahship and ultimately in the divine lordship of Jesus was their response to the impact upon them of Jesus Himself, and within this impact the miracles had their place as satellites to the sun. The cardinal miracle was and is Jesus Himself, for unless the ultimate devotion to Him as divine was idolatrous He was a unique breaking of the divine into history and nature. He was the miracle. And the particular miracles shewed to those with discerning faith various aspects of His meaning and His claim.

The Resurrection has its own unique significance. It was an event held to be primary and basic for Christianity, inasmuch as without it it is incredible that there could have been the survival of the Church and the emergence of Christianity. Without doubt the apostles used the Resurrection evidentially, as proof of the vindication of Jesus and His claim. We see this in St. Peter's speeches in Jerusalem in the early days of the Church. Yet when we look at the evidences by which the apostles themselves were led to believe in the Resurrection we find the reserve characteristic of revelation as we have seen it elsewhere in the New Testament. The evidence which convinced the disciples was evidence visible to none outside their own circle. No evidence was laid before the eyes of the Jews to see. Furthermore, the evidence which convinced the apostles was evidence not wholly separate from their total experience of Jesus, and from their belief in God and in the scriptures. Subsequently, the credibility of the testimony which they gave in their proclamation of the Resurrection was bound up with the effect of the event upon their own lives and characters. Thus, in the case of the Resurrection we see the reserve in the evidential process, the inseparability of external evidence from internal experience, and the

¹⁴ John ix. 41.

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inseparability of both from the impact of grace upon lives whose character attests their credibility.

III

What of the role of historical criticism in relation to the gospel miracles? Did they really happen? If history matters for Christianity, the questions of historical criticism must be faced fairly. It is inevitable to apply historical criticism to the narratives about miracles. When this is done it may be found to be probable that there was at least some unhistorical accretion in the miraculous element in the traditions behind the gospels. For instance it may be that what was originally a parable told by Jesus about the cursing of a fig tree came to be replaced in the tradition of the Church by a story about an actual cursing of a fig tree. It may be that some of the miraculous stories can be given rationalistic explanations. It may be that stories of demonic possession are explicable rather as stories of psychological disorder. All these possibilities must be examined, each in its context. What seems scientifically impossible is to make a dichotomy between the miracles of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus, rejecting the one and accepting the other, for in every part of the gospel traditions sayings and works are inextricably interwoven. No less unscientific is it for historical criticism to take the line that miraculous narratives are to be rejected *a priori*. Such a judgment is not in the sphere of historical criticism: it belongs to other disciplines of thought, and historical criticism confuses its function if it behaves as a philosophy in disguise.

As to the *a priori* question, my reference to it must perforce be brief. Many repeat the proposition that miracles cannot and do not happen because nature is a closed system. It is necessary to examine this proposition, to ask whether

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nature does not leave room for the operation of free human wills, whether the lawless operation of free human wills has not been responsible for large-scale chaos and frustration, whether God also is not free, whether it is incredible that His freedom should assert itself in the midst of the process of revelation and redemption in the history of Jesus Christ, and whether in this process the breaking by divine freedom of certain normal laws observed in the world may not be regarded as the assertion of some higher law in God's purpose. Those are the questions. I say no more about them than to quote the dictum of St. Augustine that miracles may be 'non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura',¹⁵ and to quote also the dictum of Archbishop William Temple that to believe in miracle is to take divine personality in real earnest.

¹⁵ *De Civitate Dei*, xxi, 8.

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Miracle is but one aspect of the supernatural. I suggested that while the concept of the supernatural—call it by what name we will—is an inevitable one, we cannot easily define its boundaries. Baron von Hügel, whom I delight to recall as one of the great Christian thinkers of this century, in his essays on ‘Heaven and Hell’ and on ‘Christianity and the Supernatural’,¹⁶ relates the supernatural specially to phenomena which have an otherworldly reference. But he also insists on the presence of the supernatural not only in experiences avowedly religious but in moral actions anywhere which point to a more than temporal or utilitarian significance for man. The otherworldly reference of the supernatural does not however exclude its presence in occasions utterly mundane or trivial where God may be at work for His children’s good. He recalls the story of how when Father Faber was dying he was given the last sacraments: but he lived a little longer than was expected, and he asked for the last sacraments again: he was told that he could not have

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them twice in the same illness, and he then said: ‘Then let’s have another chapter of Pickwick.’

None of the good Creator’s gifts lie outside the Creator’s use of them for His children’s good. But this good, lived out as it is in the everyday context of earth, is a good of a more than earthly concern. Down to earth as the supernatural may be it always relates to a world beyond. So do the miracles recorded in the New Testament: not for nothing does one of the apostolic writers call them ‘the powers of the age to come’. So do the people whom Christendom especially calls saints. It so calls them not just because they are good or do good, but because there is in them a humility, an otherworldly touch which help to make God and heaven real and near.

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¹⁶ Cf. *Essays and Addresses*, ii, chs. 7, 11.