



On the Nature and Credibility of a Miracle

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On the Idea and Scope of a Miracle

A miracle may be considered as an event inconsistent with the constitution of nature, that is, with the established course of things in which it is found. Or, again, an event in a given system which cannot be referred to any law, or accounted for by the operation of any principle, in that system. It does not necessarily imply a violation of nature, as some have supposed,—merely the interposition of an external cause, which, we shall hereafter show, can be no other than the agency of the Deity. And the effect produced is that of unusual or increased action in the parts of the system.

It is then a relative term, not only as it presupposes an assemblage of laws from which it is a deviation, but also as it has reference to some one particular system; for the same event which is anomalous in one, may be quite regular when observed in connexion with another. The Miracles of Scripture, for instance, are irregularities in the economy of nature, but with a moral end; forming one instance out of many, of the providence of God, that is, an instance of occurrences in the natural world with a final cause. Thus, while they are exceptions to the laws of one system, they may coincide with those of another. They profess to be the evidence of a Revelation, the criterion of a divine message. To consider them as mere exceptions to physical order, is to take a very incomplete view of them. It is to degrade them from the station which they hold in the plans and provisions of the Divine Mind, and to strip them of their real use and dignity; for as naked and isolated facts they do but deform an harmonious system.

From this account of a Miracle, it is evident that it may often be difficult exactly to draw the line between uncommon and strictly miraculous events. Thus the production of ice might have seemed at first sight miraculous to the Siamese; for it was a phenomenon referable to none of those laws of nature which are in ordinary action in tropical climates. Such, again, might magnetic attraction appear, in ages familiar only with the attraction of gravity. On the other hand, the extraordinary works of Moses or St. Paul appear miraculous, even when referred to those simple and elementary principles of nature which the widest experience has confirmed. As far as this affects the discrimination of supernatural facts, it will be considered in its proper place; meanwhile let it suffice to state, that those events only are connected with our present subject which have no assignable second cause or antecedent, and which, on that account, are from the nature of the case referred to the immediate agency of the Deity.

A Revelation, that is, a direct message from God to man, itself bears in some degree a miraculous character; inasmuch as it supposes the Deity actually to present Himself before His creatures, and to interpose in the affairs of life in a way above the reach of those settled arrangements of nature, to the existence of which universal experience bears witness. And as a Revelation itself, so again the evidences of a Revelation may all more or less be considered miraculous. Prophecy is an evidence only so far as foreseeing future

events is above the known powers of the human mind, or miraculous. In like manner, if the rapid extension of Christianity be urged in favour of its divine origin, it is because such extension, under such circumstances, is supposed to be inconsistent with the known principles and capacity of human nature. And the pure morality of the Gospel, as taught by illiterate fishermen of Galilee, is an evidence, in proportion as the phenomenon disagrees with the conclusions of general experience, which leads us to believe that a high state of mental cultivation is ordinarily requisite for the production of such moral teachers. It might even be said that, strictly speaking, no evidence of a Revelation is conceivable which does not partake of the character of a Miracle; since nothing but a display of power over the existing system of things can attest the immediate presence of Him by whom it was originally established; or, again, because no event which results entirely from the ordinary operation of nature can be the criterion of one that is extraordinary.

In the present argument I confine myself to the consideration of Miracles commonly so called; such events, that is, for the most part, as are inconsistent with the constitution of the physical world.

Miracles, thus defined, hold a very prominent place in the evidence of the Jewish and Christian Revelations. They are the most striking and conclusive evidence; because, the laws of matter being better understood than those to which mind is conformed, the transgression of them is more easily recognised. They are the most simple and obvious; because, whereas the freedom of the human will resists the imposition of undeviating laws, the material creation, on the contrary, being strictly subjected to the regulation of its Maker, looks to Him alone for a change in its constitution. Yet Miracles are but a branch of the evidences, and other branches have their respective advantages. Prophecy, as has been often observed, is a growing evidence, and appeals more forcibly than Miracles to those who are acquainted with the Miracles only through testimony. A philosophical mind will perhaps be most strongly affected by the fact of the very existence of the Jewish polity, or of the revolution effected by Christianity. While the beautiful moral teaching and evident honesty of the New Testament writers is the most persuasive argument to the unlearned but single-hearted inquirer. Nor must it be forgotten that the evidences of Revelation are cumulative, that they gain strength from each other; and that, in consequence, the argument from Miracles is immensely stronger when viewed in conjunction with the rest, than when considered separately, as in an inquiry of the present nature.

As the relative force of the separate evidences is different under different circumstances, so again has one class of Miracles more or less weight than another, according to the accidental change of times, places, and persons addressed. As our knowledge of the system of nature, and of the circumstances of the particular case varies, so of course varies our conviction. Walking on the sea, for instance, or giving sight to one born blind, would to us perhaps be a Miracle even more astonishing than it was to the Jews; the laws of nature being at the present day better understood than formerly, and the fables concerning magical power being no longer credited. On the other hand, stilling the wind and waves with a word may by all but eye-witnesses be set down to accident or exaggeration without the possibility of a full confutation; yet to eye-witnesses it would carry with it an overpowering evidence of supernatural agency by the voice and manner that accompanied the command, the violence of the wind at the moment, the instantaneous effect produced, and other circumstances, the force of which a narrative cannot fully convey. The same remark applies to the Miracle of changing water into wine, to the cure of demoniacal possessions, and of diseases generally. From a variety of causes, then, it happens that Miracles which produced a rational conviction at the time when they took place, have ever since proved rather an objection to Revelation than an evidence for it, and have depended on the rest for support; while others, which once were of a dubious and perplexing character, have in succeeding

ages come forward in its defence. It is by a process similar to this that the anomalous nature of the Mosaic polity, which might once be an obstacle to its reception, is now justly alleged in proof of the very Miracles by which it was then supported. It is important to keep this remark in view, as it is no uncommon practice with those who are ill-affected to the cause of Revealed Religion to dwell upon such Miracles as at the present day rather require than contribute evidence, as if they formed a part of the present proof on which it rests its pretensions.

In the foregoing remarks, the being of an intelligent Maker has been throughout assumed; and, indeed, if the peculiar object of a Miracle be to evidence a message from God, it is plain that it implies the admission of the fundamental truth, and demands assent to another beyond it. His particular interference it directly proves, while it only reminds of His existence. It professes to be the signature of God to a message delivered by human instruments; and therefore supposes that signature in some degree already known, from His ordinary works. It appeals to that moral sense and that experience of human affairs which already bear witness to His ordinary presence. Considered by itself, it is at most but the token of a superhuman being. Hence, though an additional instance, it is not a distinct species of evidence for a Creator from that contained in the general marks of order and design in the universe. A proof drawn from an interruption in the course of nature is in the same line of argument as one deduced from the existence of that course, and in point of cogency is inferior to it. Were a being who had experience only of a chaotic world suddenly introduced into this orderly system of things, he would have an infinitely more powerful argument for the existence of a designing Mind, than a mere interruption of that system can afford. A Miracle is no argument to one who is deliberately, and on principle, an atheist.

Yet, though not abstractedly the more convincing, it is often so in effect, as being of a more striking and imposing character. The mind, habituated to the regularity of nature, is blunted to the overwhelming evidence it conveys; whereas by a Miracle it may be roused to reflection, till mere conviction of a superhuman being becomes the first step towards the acknowledgment of a Supreme Power. While, moreover, it surveys nature as a whole, it is not capacious enough to embrace its bearings, and to comprehend what it implies. In miraculous displays of power the field of view is narrowed; a detached portion of the divine operations is taken as an instance, and the final cause is distinctly pointed out. A Miracle, besides, is more striking, inasmuch as it displays the Deity in action; evidence of which is not supplied in the system of nature. It may then accidentally bring conviction of an intelligent Creator; for it voluntarily proffers a testimony which we have ourselves to extort from the ordinary course of things, and forces upon the attention a truth which otherwise is not discovered, except upon examination.

And as it affords a more striking evidence of a Creator than that conveyed in the order and established laws of the Universe, still more so does it of a Moral Governor. For, while nature attests the being of God more distinctly than it does His moral government, a miraculous event, on the contrary, bears more directly on the fact of His moral government, of which it is an immediate instance, while it only implies His existence. Hence, besides banishing ideas of Fate and Necessity, Miracles have a tendency to rouse conscience, to awaken to a sense of responsibility, to remind of duty, and to direct the attention to those marks of divine government already contained in the ordinary course of events.

Hitherto, however, I have spoken of solitary Miracles; a system of miraculous interpositions, conducted with reference to a final cause, supplies a still more beautiful and convincing argument for the moral government of God.

Credibility of a Miracle

In proof of miraculous occurrences, we must have recourse to the same kind of evidence as that by which we determine the truth of historical accounts in general. For though

Miracles, in consequence of their extraordinary nature, challenge a fuller and more accurate investigation, still they do not admit an investigation conducted on different principles,—Testimony being the main assignable medium of proof for past events of any kind. And this being indisputable, it is almost equally so that the Christian Miracles are attested by evidence even stronger than can be produced for any of those historical facts which we most firmly believe. This has been felt by unbelievers who have been, in consequence, led to deny the admissibility of even the strongest testimony, if offered in behalf of miraculous events, and thus to get rid of the only means by which they can be proved to have taken place. It has accordingly been asserted, that all events inconsistent with the course of nature bear in their very front such strong and decisive marks of falsehood and absurdity, that it is needless to examine the evidence adduced for them. “Where men are heated by zeal and enthusiasm,” says Hume, with a distant but evident allusion to the Christian Miracles, “there is no degree of human testimony so strong as may not be procured for the greatest absurdity; and those who will be so silly as to examine the affair by that medium, and seek particular flaws in the testimony, are almost sure to be confounded.” Of these antecedent objections, which are supposed to decide the question, the most popular is founded on the frequent occurrence of wonderful tales in every age and country—generally, too, connected with Religion; and since the more we are in a situation to examine these accounts, the more fabulous they are proved to be, there would certainly be hence a fair presumption against the Scripture narrative, did it resemble them in its circumstances and proposed object. A more refined argument is that advanced by Hume, in the first part of his *Essay On Miracles*, in which it is maintained against the credibility of a Miracle, that it is more probable that the testimony should be false than that the Miracle should be true.

This latter objection has been so ably met by various writers, that, though prior in the order of the argument to the former, it need not be considered here. It derives its force from the assumption, that a Miracle is strictly a causeless phenomenon, a self-originating violation of nature; and is solved by referring the event to divine agency, a principle which (it cannot be denied) has originated works indicative of power at least as great as any Miracle requires. An adequate cause being thus found for the production of a Miracle, the objection vanishes, as far as the mere question of power is concerned; and it remains to be considered whether the anomalous fact be of such a character as to admit of being referred to the Supreme Being. For if it cannot with propriety be referred to Him, it remains as improbable as if no such agent were known to exist. At this point, then, I propose taking up the argument; and by examining what Miracles are in their nature and circumstances referable to Divine agency, I shall be providing a reply to the former of the objections just noticed, in which the alleged similarity of all miraculous narratives one to another, is made a reason for a common rejection of all.

In examining what Miracles may properly be ascribed to the Deity, Hume supplies us with an observation so just, when taken in its full extent, that I shall make it the groundwork of the inquiry on which I am entering. As the Deity, he says, discovers Himself to us by His works, we have no rational grounds for ascribing to Him attributes or actions dissimilar from those which His works convey. It follows, then, that in discriminating between those Miracles which can and those which cannot be ascribed to God, we must be guided by the information with which experience furnishes us concerning His wisdom, goodness, and other attributes. Since a Miracle is an act out of the known track of Divine agency, as regards the physical system, it is almost indispensable to show its consistency with the Divine agency, at least, in some other point of view if, that is, it is recognised as the work of the same power. Now, I contend that this reasonable demand is satisfied in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, in which we find a narrative of Miracles altogether answering in their character and circumstances to those general ideas which the ordinary course of Divine

Providence enables us to form concerning the attributes and actions of God.

While writers expatiate so largely on the laws of nature, they altogether forget the existence of a moral system: a system which, though but partially understood, and but general in its appointments as acting upon free agents, is as intelligible in its laws and provisions as the material world. Connected with this moral government, we find certain instincts of mind; such as conscience, a sense of responsibility, and an approbation of virtue; an innate desire of knowledge, and an almost universal feeling of the necessity of religious observances; while, in fact, Virtue is, on the whole, rewarded, and Vice punished. And though we meet with many and striking anomalies, yet it is evident they are but anomalies, and possibly but in appearance so, and with reference to our partial information.

These two systems, the Physical and the Moral, sometimes act in union, and sometimes in opposition to each other; and as the order of nature certainly does in many cases interfere with the operation of moral laws (as, for instance, when good men die prematurely, or the gifts of nature are lavished on the bad), there is nothing to shock probability in the idea that a great moral object should be effected by an interruption of physical order. But, further than this, however physical laws may embarrass the operation of the moral system, still on the whole they are subservient to it; contributing, as is evident, to the welfare and convenience of man, providing for his mental gratification as well as animal enjoyment, sometimes even supplying correctives to his moral disorders. If, then, the economy of nature has so constant a reference to an ulterior plan, a Miracle is a deviation from the subordinate for the sake of the superior system, and is very far indeed from improbable, when a great moral end cannot be effected except at the expense of physical regularity. Nor can it be fairly said to argue an imperfection in the Divine plans, that this interference should be necessary. For we must view the system of Providence as a whole; which is not more imperfect because of the mutual action of its parts, than a machine, the separate wheels of which effect each other's movements.

Now the Miracles of the Jewish and Christian Religions must be considered as immediate effects of Divine Power beyond the action of nature, for an important moral end; and are in consequence accounted for by producing, not a physical, but a final cause. We are not left to contemplate the bare anomalies, and from the mere necessity of the case to refer them to the supposed agency of the Deity. The power of displaying them is, according to the Scripture narrative, intrusted to certain individuals, who stand forward as their interpreters, giving them a voice and language, and a dignity demanding our regard; who set them forth as evidences of the greatest of moral ends, a Revelation from God,—as instruments in His hand of affecting a direct intercourse between Himself and His creatures, which otherwise could not have been effected,—as vouchers for the truth of a message which they deliver. This is plain and intelligible; there is an easy connection between the miraculous nature of their works and the truth of their words; the fact of their superhuman power is a reasonable ground for belief in their superhuman knowledge. Considering, then, our instinctive sense of duty and moral obligation, yet the weak sanction which reason gives to the practice of virtue, and withal the uncertainty of the mind when advancing beyond the first elements of right and wrong; considering, moreover, the feeling which wise men have entertained of the need of some heavenly guide to instruct and confirm them in goodness, and that unextinguishable desire for a Divine message which has led men in all ages to acquiesce even in pretended revelations, rather than forego the consolation thus afforded them; and again, the possibility (to say the least) of our being destined for a future state of being, the nature and circumstances of which it may concern us much to know, though from nature we know nothing; considering, lastly, our experience of a watchful and merciful Providence, and the impracticability already noticed of a Revelation without a Miracle, it is hardly too much to affirm that the moral system points to an interference with the course of

nature, and that Miracles wrought in evidence of a Divine communication, instead of being antecedently improbable, are, when directly attested, entitled to a respectful and impartial consideration.

When the various antecedent objections which ingenious men have urged against Miracles are brought together, they will be found nearly all to arise from forgetfulness of the existence of moral laws. In their zeal to perfect the laws of matter they most unphilosophically overlook a more sublime system, which contains disclosures not only of the Being but of the Will of God. Thus, Hume, in a passage above referred to, observes, "Though the Being to whom the Miracle is ascribed be Almighty, it does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable, since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience which we have of His productions in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation, and obliges us to compare the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men with those of the violation of the laws of nature by Miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable." Here the moral government of God, with the course of which the Miracle entirely accords, is altogether kept out of sight. With a like heedlessness of the moral character of a Miracle, another writer, notorious for his irreligion, objects that it argues mutability in the Deity, and implies that the physical system was not created good, as needing improvement. And a recent author adopts a similarly partial and inconclusive mode of reasoning, when he confuses the Christian Miracles with fables of apparitions and witches, and would examine them on the strict principle of those legal forms which from their secular object go far to exclude all religious discussion of the question. Such reasoners seem to suppose, that when the agency of the Deity is introduced to account for Miracles, it is the illogical introduction of an unknown cause, a reference to a mere name, the offspring, perhaps, of popular superstition; or, if more than a name, to a cause that can be known only by means of the physical creation; and hence they consider Religion as founded in the mere weakness or eccentricity of the intellect, not in actual intimations of a Divine government as contained in the moral world. From an apparent impatience of investigating a system which is but partially revealed, they esteem the laws of the material system alone worthy the notice of a scientific mind; and rid themselves of the annoyance which the importunity of a claim to miraculous power occasions them, by discarding all the circumstances which fix its antecedent probability, all in which one Miracle differs from another, the professed author, object, design, character, and human instruments.

When this partial procedure is resisted, the *à priori* objections of sceptical writers at once lose their force. Facts are only so far improbable as they fall under no general rule; whereas it is as parts of an existing system that the Miracles of Scripture demand our attention, as resulting from known attributes of God, and corresponding to the ordinary arrangements of His providence. Even as detached events they might excite a rational awe towards the mysterious Author of nature. But they are presented to us, not as unconnected and unmeaning occurrences, but as holding a place in an extensive plan of Divine government, completing the moral system, connecting Man and his Maker, and introducing him to the means of securing his happiness in another and eternal state of being. That such is the professed object of the body of Christian Miracles, can hardly be denied. In the earlier Religion it was substantially the same, though, from the preparatory nature of the Dispensation a less enlarged view was given of the Divine counsels. The express purpose of the Jewish Miracles is to confirm the natural evidence of one God, the Creator of all things, to display His attributes and will with distinctness and authority, and to enforce the obligation of religious observances, and the sinfulness of idolatrous worship. Whether we turn to the earlier or later ages of Judaism, in the plagues of Egypt, in the parting of Jordan, and the arresting of the sun's course by Joshua, in the harvest thunder at the prayer of Samuel, in

the rending of the altar at Bethel, in Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel, and in the cure of Naaman by Elisha, we recognise this one grand object throughout....

These and similar observations do more than invest the separate Miracles with a dignity worthy of the Supreme Being; they show the coincidence of them all in one common and consistent object. As parts of a system, the Miracles recommend and attest each other, evidencing not only general wisdom, but a digested and extended plan. And while this appearance of design connects them with the acknowledged works of a Creator, who is in the natural world chiefly known to us by the presence of final causes, so, again, a plan conducted as this was, through a series of ages, evinces not the varying will of successive individuals, but the steady and sustaining purpose of one Sovereign Mind. And this remark especially applies to the coincidence of views observable between the Old and New Testament; the latter of which, though written after a long interval of silence, the breaking up of the former system, a revolution in religious discipline, and the introduction of Oriental tenets into the popular Theology, still unhesitatingly takes up and maintains the ancient principles of miraculous interposition.

An additional recommendation of the Scripture Miracles is their appositeness to the times and places in which they were wrought; as, for instance, in the case of the plagues of Egypt, which, it has been shown, were directed against the prevalent superstitions of that country. Their originality, beauty, and immediate utility, are further properties falling in with our conceptions of Divine agency. In their general character we discover nothing indecorous, light, or ridiculous; they are grave, simple, unambiguous, majestic. Many of them, especially those of the later Dispensation, are remarkable for their benevolent and merciful character; others are useful for a variety of subordinate purposes, as a pledge of the certainty of particular promises, or as comforting good men, or as edifying the Church. Nor must we overlook the moral instruction conveyed in many, particularly in those ascribed to Christ, the spiritual interpretation which they will often bear, and the exemplification which they afford of particular doctrines.

Accepting, then, what may be called Hume's canon, that *no work can be reasonably ascribed to the agency of God, which is altogether different from those ordinary works from which our knowledge of Him is originally obtained*, I have shown that the Miracles of Scripture, far from being exceptionable on that account, are strongly recommended by their coincidence with what we know from nature of His Providence and Moral Attributes. That there are some few among them in which this coincidence cannot be traced, it is not necessary to deny. As a whole they bear a determinate and consistent character, being great and extraordinary means for attaining a great, momentous, and extraordinary object.

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