Miracles

Author(s): F. Cecil Long

Source: *The Irish Church Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 33 (Jan., 1916), pp. 35-46

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30067791>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 10:58 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Irish Church Quarterly*

MIRACLES.*

SINCE the time of Spinoza there has been remarkably little progress of thought, in one direction at least, on the subject of the miracles of the Gospels. Those who reject the miracles almost invariably make the assumption, "Miracles do not happen," the basal premiss of their reasoning; and the changes have been rung on attempts, largely mutually destructive, to explain away the Gospel testimony to their occurrence. On the other hand very marked advance has been made within the same period by those who believe the testimony, towards comprehending the meaning of the miracles and their place both in the scheme of things and in the Christian revelation; an advance achieved in the main in process of facing and rebutting the successive phases of the assertion, "Miracles do not happen." Which reminds us that it is the very inertia of the water which renders the oarsmen's labour effectual to propel the boat.

These considerations are suggested by the two books before us. In both the subject is the same, both are essentially modern, the conclusions reached in each agree. And yet so diverse are the methods of treatment that the two scarcely overlap at all. Dr. Headlam is apologetic, Dr. Illingworth is constructive. Dr. Headlam answers certain objections and presumptions that have been advanced from time to time against the Gospel miracles; and over against these he sets a clear and able summary of the evidence for the miracles—evidence which he shews to be considerably enhanced in historical

**The Miracles of the New Testament.* By A. C. Headlam, D.D. (John Murray. 6s. net.)

The Gospel Miracles. By J. R. Illingworth, D.D. (Macmillan 4s. 6d. net.)

value as the result of the higher criticism of the New Testament. Where he fails, we think, is in the attempt to present a philosophical view-point from which the miracles are seen to cohere with the general course of the world on the one hand and with the particular content of the Christian revelation on the other. This however is precisely what Dr. Illingworth undertakes to do—and does. His book is not so easy reading. Few will take it in on a first perusal; not that there is any falling away from his usual clearness of thought and expression, but because each part of the argument can only be correctly appreciated in relation to the whole. The proof of the Gospel miracles is not like an architrave supported upon its columns, but like the keystone of an arch, which itself supports what it rests upon.

The relation of miracle to natural law is a question that should come not at the beginning but at the end of an investigation of the subject of miracles. But in view of the prominence of this question in both past and present controversy, it is really necessary to clear the ground for the estimation of the evidence for miracles by getting as distinct an idea as possible of what miracles are *not*, in relation to natural law.

If by natural law we mean the formulated results of scientific research, the term miracle, if defined as a breach of natural law, includes too much. For nothing that happens is completely explicable in terms of the formulæ of science; everything on this definition would be in some degree "miraculous." And moreover what is "miraculous" in an event to-day may be "natural" to-morrow by the subsumption of the apparent exception under a new-found and more universal law. Nay, it is precisely by this means that science advances; a world in which no exceptions could be observed would be a world in which no laws could be discovered.

There is, however, another sense in which it is often assumed that a miracle is a breach of natural law; that is to say, that it is a breach of the fundamental "law" or

“uniformity” or “rational order” of nature, whereof scientific laws are more or less imperfect, and at best merely approximate, representations. But as we are entirely ignorant of this ultimate law of nature, we are never in a position to pronounce that any event, no matter how unique or diverse from everyday experience, has involved a breach of this law. Conversely, we are never justified in denying the occurrence of any event—no matter how marvellous—on the ground of its infringing the uniformity of nature. Whether we have grounds for the positive assertion that all miracles that occur do so in strict conformity with the order of nature, we shall consider presently. Meanwhile we see that *a priori* definitions of miracle are apt to lead to blind alleys.

So we make a fresh start, not from a definition but from facts—namely from the records of events commonly called miracles that are contained in the New Testament. Concerning these we inquire: first, on historical grounds, putting aside all religious and philosophical prejudices for or against the miraculous, what is the value of these records as evidence of the events having occurred; secondly, if we find the historical evidence to be good in itself, whether there was anything exceptional in the circumstances such as would render the occurrence of the events in question less improbable than on first thoughts they appear to be; and only then can we proceed to the third inquiry, what is the nature of the miracles viewed in relation to our knowledge of the world in general and of the circumstances of their occurrence in particular.

Starting then from the records of the signs and wonders performed by our Lord and His disciples, what evidence do these records yield of their truth? Dr. Headlam shews us how the Synoptic Gospels, the Acts, and the four principal Epistles of St. Paul have not merely survived criticism, but have been definitely established by means of the higher criticism as historical documents dating from the first or the beginning of the second

Christian generation. And his survey of the evidence which these documents afford, yields the following conclusions:—"All evidence, without exception, tells us that our Lord's life and activity were characterized by events which are described as miraculous. . . . Further than this, the narrative is built up on, and implies, miraculous powers. . . . There is teaching recorded which would be meaningless unless our Lord had power to work miracles." On the other hand, though attempts have been made from time to time to get back to a non-miraculous nucleus of Christianity, "objective critical grounds for rejecting the miracles have never been found." And finally, "we find abundant and first-hand evidence that the same miraculous power existed in the Church in the apostolic age."

The question of the Resurrection differs from that of the signs and wonders. It is not that it was a more "stupendous" miracle than these—such a distinction is merely subjective, and at the outset of the inquiry at any rate, utterly meaningless, when we have not decided in what a miracle consists. The distinction is not one of degree, but of kind. The signs and wonders to those who beheld them were facts of sensible experience, and—like other more normal facts—significant of the character and power of their agents. The Resurrection on the contrary was observed by none. It was rather inferred from the empty tomb, the position of the grave-clothes, the witness of the angels, the appearances and words of Him whom the disciples received as their risen Lord. It involves the interpretation of these experiences as well as the evidence of their occurrence. But so far as evidence goes, the case for the Resurrection is at least as strong as for the signs and wonders in general, incomparably stronger than for any one of them in particular. In Dr. Illingworth's words (p. 39), "our belief in the Resurrection rests upon converging and cumulative evidence;—the conversion and triumphant conviction of St. Paul; the marvellous moral change in the older

disciples; the unique character of the records; with the stupendous illumination which they receive from the antecedent course of Jewish prophecy and the subsequent history and experience of the Christian Church; and behind all this, that philosophy of the universe, that view of God's purpose in the creation and re-creation of man, which the Incarnation first revealed to the world, and of which the Church has continued, through all subsequent ages, to be the witness and the minister."

The Virgin Birth, again, stands on a different footing from either the signs and wonders or the Resurrection. There is not, as in the case of the Resurrection, any question of interpretation involved. But neither is it an event capable of being conclusively attested by eye-witnesses. The direct evidence we have is as good as could be expected—that of St. Matthew, which has all the appearance of being derived from St. Joseph, that of St. Luke, which equally seems to be traceable to the Blessed Virgin. But that evidence by itself would be utterly inadequate, as we shall see if we consider what direct evidence would convince us that such an event had taken place in our own day. Nor has the Virgin Birth actually been accepted on the mere testimony of human witnesses. It was in the light of the Resurrection, and of faith in the Incarnation that the doctrine was incorporated in the creed of the Church; and it is in the light of these truths, and of what they involve as to the nature of our Lord and the authority of His Church, that we accept it to-day. But the evidence for the Virgin Birth must ever come at the end, not at the beginning of the evidences of Christianity. It is not a vehicle of revelation so much as a revealed fact, not a miracle but a mystery. So Ignatius of Antioch declared: "Hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing, and likewise also the death of the Lord—three mysteries to be cried aloud—the which were wrought in the silence of God."

Taking it as established then that we possess extraor-

dinarily good historical evidence for the miracles of the New Testament and for the Resurrection, there still remains the antecedent improbability of events so unlike normal experience. But all probability, let us remember, is subjective, and relative to our ignorance of some of the factors of the situation. What could be more unlike any epoch in human history than the conditions of climate and vegetation which, as geologists tell us, prevailed in the coal age? What therefore in the light of experience more antecedently improbable?—until we take into view both the nature of coal as it exists, and the general conclusions of geology and physics as to the early history of the earth, when the improbability becomes a certainty that the geologists' account is substantially correct. So the antecedent improbability of miracles cannot require us blindly to reject testimony even much weaker than that we possess; but it can and does legitimately demand that, before we accept the evidence as conclusive, we shew the existence of effects to-day and circumstances at the time such as to counter-balance the improbability in question.

In answer to this demand we point first of all to the Fact of Christianity, the transformation of the human mind it has effected, the growth and power of the Church, the "moral miracles" (commonly so called) of lives changed and sanctified by the faith of the Gospel. And we call to mind that these results of Christianity are in fact bound up with the belief of Christians that Jesus Christ was born of a Virgin, worked miracles, rose from the dead, and is the supreme revelation of God to man.

But is there any necessary connexion between miracles and a revelation? Can we not conceive of miracles that reveal nothing, of a revelation that commends itself without being attested by miracles? To the question stated thus abstractly we must answer, Undoubtedly. And with this Dr. Headlam would agree (p. 142). But it is hardly enough to say, with him,

that the popular mind demands miracle in proof of revelation, and that therefore at the start of Christianity miracles were exceedingly useful and effective credentials of its truth. On the contrary, the Gospels consistently represent our Lord as refusing to work miracles in answer to this demand, and as deprecating the publishing of His miracles where they were likely to have this effect. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet." "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead."

No. The connexion we seek lies not in the abstract fact of Christianity being based on a revelation, but in the actual concrete content of that revelation. The philosophic Buddhist or Hindu may or may not believe the miraculous tales in his sacred books—it makes no difference to the path to Nirvana nor to the knowledge of the Self. Mahomet expressly disclaimed any miraculous sanction for his message, and it needed none. But empty Christianity of the miraculous, and you take away not merely one of its credentials, but its whole essential content. For if the Gospel be true at all, Christ brought not a new philosophy, though His coming yielded materials for that; not merely a purer morality, though such was involved in what He brought; not an object-lesson in what man can attain by his own effort, though He is our great Exemplar; but rather a gift from above—a new power, a new life, a new mastery of spirit over matter, a new potentiality of moral and spiritual progress for man. Had He brought only a new philosophy, a new theory of existing conditions of life, the temporary display of abnormal powers could only have confused it. Had he come simply with a new ethic, the subsequent cessation of these powers must only have weakened its authority in the long run. Had His purpose been but to inspire us by a great example, what use to lead where we have no power to follow? But if

His coming was to be the inauguration of a new stage in man's spiritual progress, it is hard to see on what grounds we could be entitled to claim that such a new factor had entered the world unless it had manifested itself in some hitherto abnormal events. "If I had not done among them the works that none other did, they had not had sin." "If Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain." Moreover, both the Resurrection and the miracles are not alone congruent with the idea of a new power operative in the world, they are expressive of the nature of that power; they are no mere credentials of a verbal revelation, they are themselves vehicles of revelation. And it is precisely this particular congruence of the Gospel miracles with the Christian revelation that constitutes the required link between the fact of Christianity and the historical evidence for the miracles; and more than neutralizes their antecedent improbability.

But before we can claim that their occurrence has been established, we must, it will be said, consider them in the light of modern thought. Dr. Illingworth well points out the great ambiguity which attaches to such phrases as "modern thought" and the "modern mind." "They vary with the idiosyncrasy of their particular employer for the time being, and denote whatever opinion or trend of opinion he may happen to consider to be most up-to-date." And he shews (as may also be gathered from Dr. Headlam) that those who nowadays hold miracles suspect, represent a survival of opinions already out of date.

Modern thought however does not consist entirely of a mass of shifting opinion. Scientific research has not only accumulated a vast quantity of detailed knowledge, but has also established certain conclusions of a general nature, foremost among which is the notion of evolution—a notion capable of being further defined and, as it were, filled in, but which has none the less become part and parcel of the thought of the present day. And so it

behoves us to consider what is the nature of the Gospel miracles viewed in relation to our modern knowledge of the part evolution plays in the constitution of the world.

Herbert Spencer argued that evolution meant the application to living things of the same mechanistic principles which prevail elsewhere. That was but a half-truth. It is true that evolution represents living beings as having become what they are by a process in which the material constituents of their organisms are subject throughout to the laws of matter. Descartes would have said as much without calling it evolution. What evolution does is to represent the process as involving in its course the appearance of new functions not strictly material or mechanical, not reducible, that is, to terms of matter and motion, yet without infringement of the ultimate law of matter, whatever that may be. The concept of evolution reconciles the continuity which science demands with the discreteness which it finds in nature, without denying either. "Evolution implies that the unprecedented continually occurs."

Nor need we await the solution of the controversy between Darwinians, Lamarckians and Mendelians, as to the actual method of organic evolution. There can be little doubt that the method has yet to be discovered, though Mendelism has brought us a long step towards its discovery by the study of laws of heredity entirely unknown to the older schools of biology. And the discovery when it comes will very probably be fruitful and suggestive for theology. But the outlines of the world's story have long since been made plain. At one time this earth contained nothing recognizable by us as life. At length the first living cell appeared. Whether the transition from the apparently not-living to the living occupied a second or a million years, whether it took place once for all under conditions that have never been reproduced, or whether the like process is going on continually on a scale too minute for observation, matters not to the present argument. The point is that when

the transition first took place, the unprecedented (so far as this earth is concerned) occurred; yet without interruption of the continuity of the world-process. Again, when life had attained to a certain degree of complexity and variety of function, the first rudimentary sensation, recognizable as such, was felt—an occurrence yet more unprecedented, as it involved not arrangement and connexion of matter, but something not material at all; and again without breach of material continuity. At a later stage consciousness of the outer world emerged, later again self-consciousness, reflection, moral responsibility, thoughts of and aspirations after what is beyond time and space and material things.

In this process it is the higher steps that explain the lower, not *vice versa*. Man has his theories of the amoeba: the amoeba has no theory of man. And although increasing complexity of organism and variety of function may be the characteristics of the ascent most obvious to the biologist, it is the increasing subservience of the organism to the purposes of the living being, the increasing individuality and unity and (as it were) selfhood of the living being itself that give significance to this complexity and variety. The brain of the scientist is a more complicated organ than that of the ape; but no scientist believes his own lucubrations to be nothing more than highly-complicated monkey-tricks.

In a word, evolution means the progressive subordination of matter to life and of life to spirit, with a correlative increase of the spirit's freedom of action and self-expression in the material world. And this freedom, be it remembered, is the fundamental postulate not only of morality but of knowledge; more fundamental than, or at least co-ordinate with, the postulate of rational order in the world. It means in man his power to determine himself in accordance with mental determinants, instead of being determined by the particles of his brain; it alone enables us to predicate truth or falsehood of his thoughts, rightness or wrongness of his volitions—predicates that cannot belong to any conjunction of material particles.

This freedom is merely potential in so far as it is the *power* of self-determination; it is actual only when man actually determines himself rationally—knows truly or wills morally. “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” “Whose service is perfect freedom.”

The concept of evolution, then, enables us to view the unprecedented in nature as occurring in harmony with nature's uniformity through the progressive “organization” of matter by spirit; yet, since the clue to the progress is thus not matter but spirit, we cannot predict the later from the earlier steps in the process. Nor is there anything to imply that the process has reached its term in man as he now is. On the contrary the degree of freedom to which spirit has already attained in and through the human organism, suggests that the next stage of the evolution of man should take the form of an unprecedented freedom of the spirit, manifesting itself not in dissociation from matter, but in new kinds and degrees of organization and subjection of matter by spirit. And the extent to which personal reaction to spiritual environment already prevails over the influence of heredity in man, together with the degree of independence of physical conditions implied in man's survival of bodily death, further leads us to expect that spiritual relationships and influences should increasingly prevail over physiological, when

“in completed man begins anew

A tendency to God.”

The true superman, the crown of the evolution of humanity, is therefore not to be looked for from the practice of eugenics but from the birth of one that shall be man yet more than man. “The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is from heaven.”

To these inferences and expectations, indefinite themselves but based on the definite results of modern science, there answer and correspond the birth, life, character, mighty works, resurrection of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, as interpreted throughout the

New Testament, as believed in by the Catholic Church; a correspondence which in turn confirms alike the theory of evolution and the faith of Christians. And for none of the attempted reconstructions of Christianity on a non-miraculous basis can this be said. They attempt to eliminate the unprecedented in the alleged interests of science—an attempt which the evolution theory has shewn to be perfectly gratuitous so far as science is concerned; and they do it (as the works under review make evident) only by an unscientific over-riding of the evidence in deference to false philosophies. The Catholic Faith alone offers a solution that agrees at once with the “converging and cumulative evidence which we possess, and with the criteria which science teaches us; while it can afford to await, not only with confidence but with interest, any further light which the progress of science may throw upon its content.”

In what has been said there is implied the answer to the remaining question, whether all miracles that occur do so in strict conformity with the order of nature. We have seen that there are two fundamental postulates alike of science and of morality—the freedom of man, and the rational order of the world. The proof of these lies not in experience—though experience brings them to our notice and yields illustrations of them—but in the fact that without these postulates neither knowledge nor the transmission of knowledge, neither moral choice nor moral action, would be possible. Taken together they mean that matter is necessarily subject to reason (or spirit), but spirit is not necessarily subject to matter. And we have learnt to regard miracles as extreme instances, as compared with normal experience, of the free control of matter by spirit. So that the same considerations which prescribe the postulate of rational order through the rest of the scale of evolution apply here; and it becomes evident that miracles do not involve any breach of the ultimate law of nature.

F. CECIL LONG.