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The miracles of the Old Testament

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GRADUATION THESIS

"The Miracles of the Old Testament."

by

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OUTLINE OF
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Three different attitudes are being taken with reference to the miraculous events recorded in the Holy Scriptures. There are, first, those who are totally averse to any attempt whatever to explain on the basis of natural cause and effect; who refuse either to substitute nature for God, or call Providence by the name of Evolution. Over against these are those who imply, if they do not implicitly affirm, that there is not a single miracle in either the Old or New Testaments; who further assert that there is nothing any more supernatural in the Christian religion than in any other, that miracles are the growth of oral traditions. The third attitude lies between these two extremes, agreeing in part with each, emphasizing that all that is supernatural is of God, yet willing occasionally to speculate as to how certain wonders were brought about; they are inclined to recognize the relation of cause and effect, at the same time to recognize the Divine causative element.

It is the purpose of this discussion to take account of the changed conception of miracle, to point out the nature of the change, how it is manifested,

and what have been the moulding influences. An effort will also be made to adequately define miracle, and to offer criteria of genuineness that may be easily applied throughout this paper to the miracles of the Old Testament particularly. Especial attention will be paid to the history of miracles in the Old Testament, and to the theological ideas underlying them. In short, our purpose is to determine the power and influence of miracles on Old Testament religion.

The conception of the nature and significance of miracles has changed during the past two centuries. Fundamentally it has been a change in philosophy; from Deism, which reduces the Universe to a mere machine left running by a Creator who has ever after absented himself, to Theism, which thinks of God as being immanent--that is, ever expressing His creative will and purpose through the constant order of nature, yet independent of His creation. To the former a miracle would be a most improbable thing, nothing less than an invasion into the realm of natural laws. But for the latter it would be neither improbable nor impossible. Nature is only

the product of His ceaseless activity. The unusual or supernatural is conceivably a normal act of God, not out of harmony with the natural order.

This change of conception is a part of a much larger development which has manifested itself in several directions. The new spirit in science and the rise of the art of literary criticism are examples. For a time this intellectual development, popularly known as Criticism, seemed to be antagonistic to the integrity of Biblical revelation, accounted for largely through the unfriendly attitude of many of the critics and scientists. But of recent years, it has become apparent that their work was not really antagonistic, but that they made some very valuable contributions to the discussion of some of the very vexing problems of biblical or religious nature. To be sure the findings of science and criticism have shattered many of the traditional views; and for a long time there was bitter hostility between the opposing sides. The traditionalists fought (and the few remaining today are fighting) for what seems to them to be the very life of the faith. But there are few that fail to see that ^{at} heart science and crit-

icism were not atheistic, and had no right to be. For the most part the individual scientists and critics were actuated by a keen desire for truth, and in many instances were zealous for the faith also. Scientific investigation has no concern for the origins of life, but solely with the manifestations thereof. Literary criticism does not seek to go back of the beginnings, but in dealing with the record of developing life, it does care to go back as far as the beginnings. It really makes no difference with the integrity of the underlying principles of life or revelation if in the laboratory men are able to point out the successive steps by which life has come from the simple to the complex, or if they are able to show that there were two Isaiahs, or that the Pentateuch was ^{not} written by Moses. No religious ideals would be disturbed in the least.

The changed intellectual attitude towards miracles has been effected more by literary and historical criticism than by scientific investigation. A human element under Divine direction has been discovered in the literary structure of the Bible. This is as true of the miracle records as of any other por-

tion of the Scriptures. In some instances it is quite plain that the language once thought to be miraculous is really figurative or poetic: e. g. Joshua commanding the sun to stand still, the stars fighting in their courses ^{against} ~~for~~ Sisera, or the mountains skipping like rams and the little hills like young sheep. In other cases, literary criticism has contended that the language merely describes natural events: e. g. the crossing the Red Sea. And in still other cases, the historical accuracy of certain narratives has been questioned, especially as far as the miraculous nature is concerned: e. g. Jonah and the whale. Some critics have said that most of the events usually considered miraculous, were really phenomena explicable by laws that are now known. All this has resulted in a general modification of the view of Old Testament miracles (not less that of the New Testament miracles). Yet in no sense can it be said that the miraculous element has been rejected. We may strip them of all that modern thought regards as crude: we may make allowances for the incompetency of translators, and their inability to transfer from one language to another the essential idea: we may grant the imaginative and exaggerative tendency of the Oriental mind: but we do not

than get rid of the miracle. Miracles ARE miracles because of their intrinsic character. Their claim lies in their relation to the obvious necessities arising from an order of which they are a part.

In this discussion, the term "miracle" is taken in the sense in which it is employed in common usage: viz., "that form of the supernatural which has its theatre in the sense perceptions." (H. C. Sheldon, Christian Doctrine, page 105ff) Dorner's definition is admirable: "Miracles are sensuously cognizable events not comprehensible on the ground of the causality of nature and the given system of nature as such, but essentially on the ground of God's free action alone." (System of Christian Doctrine, paragraph 55) It is not incredible that God should introduce effects into the order of nature. The free agency of man allows this daily. God is infinitely freer in His agency than man, and infinitely wiser. Nor does harm result from this insertion into the natural order to the order itself. But the human mind is so constructed that the very strangeness of these supernatural phenomena blinds one to the real significance. Were they to occur a few times in succession

the wonder would cease: they would seem commonplace. Is not this the case with many of our common experiences? Once wireless telegraphy was a miracle: now it is a commodity of unquestioned value. But is it any less a miracle? From the human point of view all phenomena are either natural or supernatural. The supernatural is that which cannot be explained by any known law, and which is not preceded in human experience. Hence, to the ignorant or unlearned man, there will be many more supernatural phenomena, than appear to the educated man, most of which will be easily explainable to the latter. Spinoza was right in a measure when he said that miracles and ignorance are controvertible terms.

Since there is possibility that some so-called miracles may not be correctly named, it is expedient that we have some criteria of genuineness. H. C. Sheldon suggests a three fold test that is adequate: first, that some intrinsic and recognizable connection with ends that may be regarded as worthy of Divine wisdom and benevolence be found; second, that the supposed miracle be confirmed by a sufficient amount of honest and intelligent testimony; and third, that they demon-

strate efficiency to impress men healthfully or promote their moral and spiritual development. (System of Christian Doctrine, page 107) In other words, a true miracle is consistent with Divine wisdom and benevolence, is attested by indisputable testimony, and is employed to promote spiritual welfare. To this test all supposed supernatural experiences should be submitted that their genuineness or authoritiveness, if there be any, may be revealed.

We have been considering miracles in general, with reference to their place in modern thought. We shall now turn to the miracles of the Old Testament in particular, and determine so far as we are able their genuineness and their influence on the life and religion of the Hebrews.

The Old Testament is the most intensely supernatural book in all literature. It is also the most indifferent to the distinction between miraculous and supernatural. Belief in the direct action of God leads to the use of language which gives the impression of frequent occurrence of miraculous events. Every historical incident seems in the narration to be a special miracle. No other race, so much as the Hebrew, had

such a sense of Divine presence and providence.

The miracles of the Old Testament are grouped around two epochs of history. The first ~~was~~ is the time of the deliverance from the bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt, when Moses was the leader of the people and representative of Jehovah. The other period was during the religious revival associated with the careers of Elijah and Elisha. To be sure, these periods are described in greater detail than any other period; but miracles are by no means confined to these periods alone. They are a very vital part of the whole of Old Testament revelation. The prophets had very little to say about them, but there can be little question about their believing in the possibility of the miraculous. When Ahaz was unconvinced by Isaiah's assurances of Divine assistance, the prophet challenged him with these words, "Ask thee a sign of Jehovah thy God; ask it in the depth or in the height above." (Isa. 7:11) There was no wavering of the prophet's faith in Jehovah's ability and certainty to perform a miracle. However it is not without significance that at the two crises in the fortunes of the nation, the evidences of Divine leading were most apparent.

We must begin our inquiry into the historical miracles with the beginning of history, the call of Abraham. Before that event, even if any miracles in the strictest sense of the term are included in the record, we are in doubt as to whether to take them as literal fact or not. Leaving out visions, and similar indications of Divine will or purpose, we are struck with the fact that there are no miracles recorded till we come to the time of Moses. That is to say, though history begins with Abraham, miracles do not. Apart from the two epochs mentioned above, only some twenty or thirty miraculous events are scattered over a period of about 1500 years.

The attested miracles, about which there is little or no question, may be grouped as follows:

Those connected with the call
of Moses and Aaron Ex. 3.

The Plagues Ex. 7-10

Miracles in the Wilderness
Ex. 14-17
Lev. 10
Num. 11-22
Josh. 3-5

Miracles during period of
Judges Jud. 6-15
I Sam 5-7-12

Miracles during Monarchy
II Sam. 5-6 I Kgs. 13

Miracles of Elijah and
Elisha I Kgs. 17-11
II Kgs. 20 ..

A more careful study of this list, which is given ^{here} only in outline, will reveal very little difficulty in determining the genuineness of nearly all the miracles recorded. The sweetening of the waters of Marah (Ex. 15), the quails and the manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16), water from the rock (Ex. 17), waters of Meribah (ibid) Elijah fed by ravens (I Kgs. 17), the widow's meal (I Kgs. 17), deadly pottage cured (II Kgs 4), these and perhaps others teach and illustrate the providential care of God. Therefore, it can be said of them that they "have intrinsic and recognizable connection with ends that may be regarded as worthy of Divine benevolence." Furthermore, they would be likely to healthfully impress men and promote their spiritual welfare; since they brought men into knowledge and contact with God. So far as their authenticity is concerned, there is little if any question as to the genuineness of the record.

*no question as to
genuineness record
Some question as to
authenticity*

It is hardly the province of this discussion to go into a critical study of each reputed miracle of the Old Testament. John the Apostle, who

thought the longest about miracles, calls them "signs". They were not merely illustrations; they were actually doctrine and revelation. A study of the Old Testament miracles in the light of those of the New Testament, uncovers the fact that they are precisely what the later miracles are, signs or revelations of God.

To continue our general observations of the Old Testament miracles, we may mention some which seem to point towards God's creative power. It does not alter the truth, or deny the miraculous, to say they were just intensified forms of disease or calamities to which the country was naturally liable. The hand of God is as certainly in the ordinary and natural as in the unnatural or supernatural. That which we cannot explain away is that they occur at just the precise times and under such conditions as we find related in the story. From the Hebrew's point of view, they were miraculous; and for the purposes of our discussion, we must accept his view point, lest we fail to note the effect of the supernatural as he conceives it on the religious life of his day. The Plagues, to which reference is being made, revealed a God who was displeased with the treatment his chosen people had received,

and, who was disposed to protect them and to punish their tormentors. Thus the real values of this particular group of miracles, are moral and religious, instead of historical.

Somewhere in his writings, in referring to the Old Testament miracles in particular, John Henry Newman speaks of the purpose of them as follows: "They were wrought, for the most part, on a grand scale in face of the world, to supply whole nations with evidence concerning the Deity." He is representative of a large number of people who consider miracles to be nothing other than vouchers for the truth or authenticity of a message. Indeed, this is quite the common view of the purpose of miracles. But if this were the case, we should have to conclude that the Plagues were either not miracles or failures. They did not convince whole nations. So far as the record goes, about the only result was that the religion of the Hebrews was preserved and given a great impetus. And, even this result is far less than what we would expect. In point of fact, none of the Old Testament teachers relied on the miraculous to attest the truth of their messages. Leaving Elijah and Elisha out of mind for a moment,

what miraculous attestation to prophetic teaching remains? One or two signs appealed to by Samuel, a remarkable group of wonders in the life of Daniel, and two very uncertain miracles in the life of Isaiah, these are about all that remain. Striking though these are, there is no indication that they were depended on by the persons involved for purposes of proof.

The common view of the purpose of miracles, about which we have been speaking, might not untruly be applied to the wonders of Elijah and Elisha. Of the contest on Mt. Carmel, it surely can be said that here was a miracle "wrought on a grand scale to supply whole nations with evidence regarding the Deity." Yet, to be exact, that miracle was hardly an evidence of the Deity: it was more a sign of God's presence with and his attitude towards Elijah. To be sure, this miracle, and others of the same day, have evidential value. The proof of the prophet's wonder working was also the proof of his mission. The crossing of Jordan after Elijah's translation (I Kgs. 18) had this result for Elisha. But Elisha's miracles are all overshadowed by Elijah's, and lose something of their full significance thereby. One wonders whether they

are repetitions, the products of traditions.

It is entirely different, however, with the miracles of the Exodus. They were not isolated nor purposeless. They were bound up to the very life of the nation. Their declared object was the deliverance of the children of Israel. Humanly speaking, they were necessary. "I am sure that the King of Egypt will not let you go, no not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof; after that I will let you go." (Ex. 3: 19-20) Yet this is not true of them all. The passage of the Red Sea (Ex. 14) differs in purpose from that of the transformation of Moses' rod (Ex. 4). One was designed to deliver Israel; the other was an attestation of the Divine commission of Moses. Moses' and Aarons' signs were nothing more than condescensions to human weaknesses. But for the most part, the miracles of the Exodus bear testimony of the desires and purposes of Jehovah working out through Moses.

To conclude this very general critical study, the following observations may be made regarding Old Testament miracles: (1) they are lacking in evidence, as compared with those of the New Testament; (2) Some of them are beyond the power of imagination or invention, especially of that day; (3) some are attested by

natural phenomena; (4) some are strokes of judgment or chastisement inducing repentance; (5) they were all worked in the name of Jehovah; (6) they were only occasional.

Another very interesting comparison which is not without value, grows out of our attempt to view the Old Testament miracles in the light of those of the New Testament. One is reminded that some of the Old Testament wonders find their greatest significance in their relation to Jesus Christ. Indeed, he deliberately used some of them in direct personal application. Referring to the healing of the Israelites by the sight of the brazen serpent (Num. 21), he said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3: 14-15 See also John 12: 32). Similarly, both what he said as he uttered, "I am the bread of life," (John 6: 35, 48), and "I am the water of life" (John 4) and the Old Testament incidents of manna provision and water drawing assume new meanings when considered side by side. His likening himself to be the light of the world (John 8: 12) surely must have called to many

minds the story of the fiery pillar of wilderness days. So might it also be said that the incident of the healing of the Shunamite's son (I Kgs. 17) was prophetic of the Christ who would say, "I am the life." It is hardly reasonable to say that all the Old Testament miracles were prophecies of the Messiah; but it is reassuring as to the genuineness and authenticity of them, and their purpose, to find that Jesus Christ made such free use of them in his ministry and teaching.

It may be thought by some that we ought not to consider anything miraculous which is plainly not so according to our modern standards. But we must remember that we are studying the effect of miracles on the religious life of the Hebrews: that means the effect of what he thought was a miracle. True enough, miracle did not have the same significance for the ancients that it has for us. We call all phenomena that we cannot explain by law supernatural. He called what he could not explain miracle, and connected it with the agency of God. It is always the unexpected and unexplainable event that is miraculous. We have already noted that there is more of miracle for the unlearned

man than for the learned. It isn't hard, therefore, to see why there should have been so much more of miracle for the Hebrew than for us: he was not as experienced as are we. Then it is likewise true that he had a very defective view of nature. All events alike supernatural or otherwise, were the works of God to him. The course of human history for him was just the course of the will of God operative through men. His philosophy of history ^{was} religious. He did not stop to inquire whether an unusual event really was a miracle, whether it could be traced to some definite and natural cause. He saw the hand of God in all events. Nature was not a fixed and inflexible order for him, as we consider it to be. It was the field in which Jehovah might illustrate or objectify his relation to men. Thus miracle gave definiteness to the idea of Divine personality.

If this be the case, we may then conclude that the miracle records of the Old Testament are also records of the developing idea of God. This is not to say that they are the only such records. But as men grew and human history increased in volume, so, also, men progressed in God-consciousness. We

surely expect to find that men of a later century know more about God than those of the first century. Their chances of meeting with Him may not be greater, but they have the experiences and conclusions of the preceding centuries to build on. So we believe that the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, is the record of this developing and expanding consciousness of the Deity.

The historical grouping of the miracles assists in studying this evolving idea of Divine personality. The miracles of the Exodus reveal a jealous God, with many human attributes which are unthinkable today. He is spoken of as having a human form and as spatially limited. He has not only the attributes of consciousness and will power, but also the passions and changing purposes of men. During the period of the Judges and the rise of the Monarchy, we find these anthropomorphic ideas more pronounced. God was easily provoked to anger; He took frequent vengeance on His enemies. He laughs to scorn the pride of men. He hates, as well as loves, and even repents.

A more spiritualized conception gains currency about the time of the division of the monarchy.

He has less of the human about Him. Working with and through the prophets, He displays loftier purposes and a willingness to share the experiences of men. It isn't God that is undergoing all this change: it is the human conception of Him that is widening and becoming spiritualized. Thus are we able to catch some glimpses of the development of the idea of Divine personality in the miracle records.

In conclusion, we may remind ourselves that there is a definite miraculous element in the Old Testament. It has never been out grown nor obliterated. It has borne the brunt of many assaults during the past century, but it has emerged unshaken. The most that has been accomplished by the conflict of criticism is ^{ment} ~~ing~~ the establishing of the true purpose of miracles. So far as those of the Old Testament are concerned, we have already noted that they have considerably more of didactic value than evidential. In very few instances were miracles employed to attest the validity of a message or the authority of a commission. Rather, the miracles were employed as a means of revelation. The power or effect of the supernatural element in the Old Testament on the religion of the Hebrews is to be

noted in two outstanding ways. First, it objectified
Divine teaching and will, so that it was the more easily
discernable and comprehended. Second, it gave definiteness
to the idea of Divine personality.