

Box A 22

GOD, NATURE and MIRACLES

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"I used to be a Christian, but then it seemed that the laws of Nature discovered by scientists made such things as miracles impossible and I lost my faith".

... "I lost my faith when I read a book which convinced me that some of the miracles performed by Christ could be perfectly well explained in natural terms, without any reference to the supernatural".

... "I used to believe the Bible was true and found it a great help to me when I read it; but then one day I discovered that the creation of the world and of animals and man appeared to be most easily explained by the theory of evolution, and I thought that if that is true then the Bible can't be true as well, so I gave up believing in the Bible and reading it".

How many times I have had things like this said to me, by young and old alike. The young people have been introduced to scientific knowledge at school and at university. The older people have read

one or other of the many semi-popular scientific magazines so readily available today on bookstalls and in bookshops.

How does one go about discussing and seeking to answer the kind of problems raised in my opening quotations? These and many similar problems are all concerned in one way or another with the impact of scientific discoveries and of the scientific outlook upon traditional Christian beliefs. And by implication the same sorts of issues seem to call into question the reliability of what we read in our Bibles.

Personally, and for reasons which I shall give you in a minute, I find it singularly fruitless and self-defeating when such issues are raised to get involved at once in heated arguments on whether this or that miracle really did occur as it is recorded in the Bible. Or on whether any particular aspect of the theory of evolution is beyond dispute. You see, I believe that there are certain much more fundamental questions which must be tackled before one can even

begin to answer the very specific and detailed questions of the kind that I raised at the beginning. And since I take this view, I intend to follow it out this evening by first discussing basic questions and then going on to show how, when we get these properly answered, many of the other ones have either evaporated and disappeared, or have been put in a quite different perspective.

One other introductory note needs to be sounded, because when one presumes to express one's views on a topic such as miracles it becomes doubly important to emphasize the standpoint from which one speaks. As a scientist I am not presuming to enter an arena already tightly packed with biblical scholars heatedly debating matters such as the historical accuracy and the meaning of the text of the Bible. I am simply not qualified to enter this arena, but can only try and remain, I hope, an intelligent .. and let it be admitted .. at times, perplexed spectator.

At the same time, I have formed

the impression that some theologians have, in some respects, so misunderstood what the scientist means when he speaks of a Law of Nature, that they have adopted attitudes towards miracles which are unnecessarily defensive, and which do less than justice to the biblical record.

The first question to which as a Scientist and a Christian I must address myself is, - how do I relate my world view and my working assumptions as a Scientist, to the biblical record which records events usually described as miraculous?

This general question implies certain other basic questions, such as

First - What is the relation of God, the Creator, to His creation?

Second - What is meant by a Law of Nature?

Third - What, according to the Bible, is the primary purpose of miracles? In other words, why did they happen at all?

For the benefit of those present who are not Christians and who may not share the views that I express, may I add just one more preliminary remark. I am not in any sense trying to argue you into becoming a Christian. Rather, I am saying something like this ... having become a Christian myself, this is the way in which I find it most reasonable and most meaningful to make sense of the whole of my experience, as an ordinary person, as a follower of Christ and as a practising research scientist. When I have finished speaking you may well say .. "Well, that may be your way of looking at things, but I find it more meaningful to regard it in this or that way".

And there, it seems to me, the matter rests, until we can sit down together and examine each other's presuppositions in detail. For we all have presuppositions. We all have to start somewhere in our thinking about life. Even if it is nothing more basic than the presuppositions that life can be made sense of at all. And that in a rough and ready sort of way we can make valid decisions based

on the knowledge we derive from our daily experience, - although even that is a presupposition, because you could not doubt believe indeed that life is just one big illusion - a bit like an unending dream.

Now, back to our questions. What is the relation of God to His creation? Clearly any answer that we offer must be either given in some way by God Himself, - what we usually call revealed to us, - that is by revelation - or it must be the opinion of an individual based upon his own knowledge and the accumulated knowledge of mankind down the ages. Let us be quite clear that you cannot logically deduce from within science itself, anything that can help you to answer this question. You may, as a scientist, express an opinion one way or the other on this issue, but since it is NOT a scientific question it cannot be answered by the normal scientific procedures of observation, experiment, deductive reasoning, and so on. To put the matter crudely, you cannot put God into a test tube and do ex-

periments on Him ... though you can do this with His creation.

Since the Christian DOES claim to have some sort of an answer to this question, an answer which God has chosen to GIVE to man, we must examine what this answer is. To put the question another way ... What does the Bible teach about the relation of God to creation?

First, it teaches that God took the initiative. That He created. Thus we read in the opening sentence of the Bible .. "In the beginning, God," - in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. In other words, He created the lot .. everything. He need not have done, but He did. But note that whilst the Bible, and especially the early chapters of the Bible are concerned to teach us that it was God who was responsible and is responsible for all things, yet it does not attempt nor claim to tell us in any scientific sense, how He went about this. In other words, the Bible is in no sense a text book of Geology or Zoology or any other science. If it were, and if it had been written in the

language of mid-twentieth century Science it would have been incomprehensible to generations before our own, and I venture to suggest, incomprehensible even today to those without specialised scientific training.

Secondly, the Bible does NOT teach that God in creating the world simply set it going and then went off and left it to its own devices. He is not like a watch-maker who makes a watch, winds it up and then goes off and leaves it to wind down.

Thirdly, the Bible teaches that God sustains His creation. That He keeps it going. That He holds it in being from moment to moment. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it .. "He upholds all things by the Word of His Power" (Heb. 1:3); or as Paul says in Acts 17 .. "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth ... giveth to all life and breath .. for in Him we live, and move, and have our being".

We thus have to conclude that the activity of God is not to be seen only, or even principally, in

those events which may puzzle us, or where we have so far failed to provide scientific explanations, but that His activity is to be seen rather in the way in which He holds the whole show in being moment by moment.

May I try to make this a little clearer by using an analogy - remembering of course, that like all analogies it will become nonsensical if you try to force it beyond its main purpose.

Let us consider that we are watching a television production of a new play, which has been written and produced by the owner of the television transmitting station. Let us further imagine that the presentation of this play includes a long section portraying an episode from a hitherto unknown game, called Cricket. I do not doubt that if we watched the picture for long enough we could eventually discover the rules of the game. We might discover, for instance, that if the man with the ball managed to hit the three bits of wood behind the man with the bigger piece of wood, then that man usu-

ally left the field and another man took his place .. and so on and so on. Now in a way, our position as viewers of this performance is a picture of the scientist at work observing God's Creation and trying to discover the rules of how the events he observes in it hang together and follow one another.

The point of the analogy is this. What we mean as Christians when we say that God upholds all things at all times, is that God is the originator of the programme being sent out from the television transmitting station. Because if the transmitter stops transmitting there will be nothing left on the screen for us to go on observing; the show will be over. In other words, the very fact that there is any show at all for us to watch is dependent upon the television transmitting station holding the picture in existence from moment to moment.

So we believe that it is only the sustaining, upholding activity of God which keeps the whole show - which is the Universe in which we live - in existence from moment to

moment. This is a matter of faith. It can be neither proved nor disproved in any scientific sense. As scientists, all we can do is take what is given, and study it.

Now our next question is this... What implications does all this have for our understanding of Miracles?

It is sometimes said that Miracles could not happen because that would involve the breaking of one or more of the Laws of Nature. But consider for a moment what is meant by a Law of Nature. It is a convenient shorthand statement which summarises some set of observed regularities in the events which takes place in nature. Laws of Nature are thus discovered by us, in the sense that they summarize the ways in which things happen. And they may also be used to predict the way things are most likely to happen in the future. But we should be careful not to claim more than this. Because whilst observation can tell us what has happened, it cannot tell us what could have happened. Only eye witnesses and good testimony can

inform us on that.

We have seen earlier that the Christian teaching about the relation of God to His creation is that nothing continues in being apart from His creative activity. Since this is so, it therefore becomes meaningless to ask whether natural laws "leave room for God's activity", or whether God "uses natural laws", or "intervenes, and suspends them from time to time", in order to work miracles. The fact of the matter is that what we call "natural laws" are our shorthand way of describing the consistencies which we observe in the way God's creation works. And since on a Christian view the whole show which makes up our Universe and our experience is conceived and held in existence by God - just as the display is present on our T.V. screens only because the whole programme has been put together and generated at the transmitting station - it then becomes not only stupid, but misguided and wrong, to speak of miraculous events as breaking the laws of nature. At the same time, and by the same token, it is dishonouring to God

to regard miracles as the only evidences of God's working in nature.

This point I hope will become a little clearer in a moment when we consider what the Bible teaches about the nature and occurrence of miracles. So let us turn now, and see on what aspects of miraculous events the Bible seeks to focus our attention.

The word "miracle" is derived from the Latin word "miror" meaning "to be astonished at" .. "to marvel" .. or "to wonder". I mention this because I believe that it at once helps to focus our attention in the proper direction. It reminds us that the biblical record is primarily concerned with the impression a miracle makes upon the mind, and with its relation to God's purposes, rather than with its relation to the natural order. The biblical view is that whilst all events proceed in some sense from God's Hand, yet there are nonetheless special events which, on account of the dullness or stubbornness of human understanding, constrain the mind to face religious issues. For the Christian who is

a scientist, miracles do not cast chaos into the universe. They are for him yet another, albeit different aspect, of God's continuing activity which he, the scientist, sees on every side. The true fittingness of miracles is then seen most clearly when they are viewed as part of the total story of creation and of redemption.

When a miraculous event occurs, it is not that God who was previously inactive has suddenly become active - not at all. Rather, in the miraculous event the pattern of God's activity is of such a kind that it draws attention to itself. Thus, for example, after Our Lord had healed the paralytic we are told that the crowd of onlookers was amazed and said .. "We have seen strange things today" (Luke 5:26). That is, things contrary to their normal experience, inexplicable by them at that time apart from God's Power. The act thus called their attention forcibly to the authority of Jesus.

The first thing we have noted, then, is that the Bible focuses

our attention on the manner or pattern and timing of the miracle, not upon how it is related to nature.

The second thing we quickly discover is that the miracles can be broadly classified into three main types. There are some which stand out because of the fact that they are unusual and awe-inspiring. They have a magnetic attraction which serves to fix men's attention on the message which accompanies them. Such events are apparent to all men's eyes and not only to the eyes of faith. Thus it was, for example, that the miraculous preservation of Israel excited admiration in the hearts of surrounding nations so that we read (Josh.2:10) of how, for example, Rahab said to the two men who had come to spy out the land .. "We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in

any man, because of you: for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath".

There are other events which we regard as miraculous because they are clearly outside of normal expectations in their cause or in their timing. Thus the mighty acts of Jesus were performed by One Who Himself is called the Power of God (1 Cor.1:27). These actions were entirely appropriate and in keeping with the character of the Man who was also God, and were His credentials in the midst of an incredulous generation.

Lastly, there are those events whose main purpose seems to have been as tokens, signs or pledges. Thus the healing miracles rolled back temporarily the claims of death, and prophesied a coming Day when death itself would be abolished.

As we have listed these three main categories of miracles we have also, I think, begun to highlight some of the main purposes of miracles. We may summarise these as follows -

- .. They provide external testimony to the truth of the Gospel and of its messengers.
- .. They serve, so to speak, to underline in red pencil the redemptive processes of God's activity.
- .. They give powerful incentive to faith in the unbelieving man.
- .. They press home the urgency of a decision about God's claims by making the issue unmistakably clear.
- .. They are pledges, tokens, signposts, to the coming of a new Age.

And yet for all this it is worth noting that, in fact, miracles are surprisingly relatively scarce in the Bible as a whole. They seem to be grouped round certain great epochs, and cluster about the great personalities of redemption such as Moses, Elijah, Christ, Peter and Paul. There are, for instance, no miracles accredited to Samuel, or Isaiah or Jeremiah. This relative scarcity should I think increase our

confidence in the actual record, since if one had been just writing a tall story seeking to impress, no doubt one would have loaded it with a heavy dosage of miracles throughout.

I think it is also necessary to remember that many people, no doubt for the sake of simplicity, think of a miracle as the direct and immediate product of a divine manipulation of Nature. And yet the crossing of the Red Sea is a very good corrective to such a view. It is in fact expressly stated that the cause of the rolling back of the waters is a strong east wind (Ex. 14:1,21). Thus at its minimum it was still a miracle of timing - it happened when Moses stretched his hand over the sea. It is a vivid example of how God in His divine upholding over events and forces that we call natural, controls a situation which for other reasons we regard as miraculous. It is thus the context of the miracle that marks it off as something outside of normal experience, and thus an event compelling a more careful hearing of the message associated with it.

It is interesting to compare the biblical miracles and the way they fit so perfectly into the history of God's redemptive purposes with the Pagan miracle stories, which by contrast specialise in sensational and nonsensical, yet useless feats of seemingly superhuman skill.

And yet in the final analysis all the other Biblical miracles fade into insignificance when placed beside the miracle of the Resurrection. Here we are faced with a reversal of the normal processes of deterioration, decay and degeneration. Neither are we asking an unbeliever to believe that a prehistoric monster was seen suspended from a soap bubble by a group of mentally defective children. No, the Resurrection is put forward as the event that happened to the world's most outstanding Man. It is based on the witness and testimony of hundreds who saw him risen, and of others who failed to refute the claim by producing the body. To refuse to consider this witness seriously is to endanger the basis of ordinary life, based as it is on the reliability of human testimony. For we are

faced with the unwavering testimony of the Apostles who under pain of persecution and death refused to surrender their belief in the Resurrection.

But make no mistake, I am only too aware that if you are a convinced Atheist, who has already decided that your belief that the Resurrection could not have happened is beyond question, then not only will you refuse to accept the historical record of the testimony of your fellow-men, but you would even, had you been present at the Resurrection, merely have concluded that ghosts exist after all, rather than believe that Christ rose from the dead. And you will do this for the very good reason that to believe in ghosts makes no claims upon you, and causes you very little discomfort. Whereas to accept the truth of the Resurrection so sets the seal upon the Life and Words of Christ, that you are faced with a challenge to re-evaluate your whole values and aims in life, such that you can never be the same man again.

Let me sum up what I have been

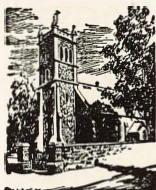
trying to convey to you. I do not believe that the claimed occurrence of miracles can, nor should be, used as if it forms some sort of a final and knockdown argument for believing the Christian message. Thus, miracles do not constitute some sort of knockdown proof for the truth of Christianity. Indeed, such a use of miracle is I believe almost certainly completely foreign to the mentality of the New Testament writers, and of those living in New Testament times. Rather would it be more accurate to say that the New Testament presents us with miracles as events bearing witness to something or someone. And a witness may always be disbelieved. A miracle thus remains a witness that challenges, rather than evidence that compels.

I have further pointed out that on strictly scientific grounds the possibility of miracles can never be excluded. To say this is not to pretend that the factuality of miracles is not still ultimately a matter of faith. We must never fall into the trap of making acceptance of the factuality of

certain miracles - other than the Resurrection of Christ - as a prerequisite to faith in Christ. We single out the Resurrection because "if Christ be not risen then is our faith in vain" (1 Cor.15:17) and we have no living Christ to present to our unbelieving friends. The proper place of miracles in the presentation of the Christian Gospel is that the possibility of their occurrence as witnesses to the Biblical records should be linked with a personal testimony to our own faith in the Risen Christ. So it is that those of us who have a personal knowledge of Christ continue to sing, with humble assurance ...

"He lives, He lives, Christ
Jesus lives today,
He walks with me and talks with
me along life's narrow way,
He lives, He lives, salvation
to impart
You ask me how I know he lives?
He lives within my heart."

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