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THE PURPOSE OF MIRACLES

Miracles, it is said, are contrary to experience. Of course they are contrary to our experience, but that does not prove that they were contrary to the experience of those who witnessed them. We believe a thousand facts, both of history and of science, that are contrary to our experience, but we believe them on the ground of competent testimony. An atheist or a pantheist must, as a matter of course, deny the possibility of miracles; but to one who believes in a personal God, who in His wisdom may see fit to interfere with the ordinary processes of nature, miracles are not impossible, nor are they incredible.

What we human considered miracles of God are in reality not supernatural to God –they are normal and standard actions of God.

Unlike the modern world, the ancient world was not suspicious of miracles. They were regarded as a normal, if somewhat extraordinary, part of life. Ancient people typically believed not only that supernatural powers existed, but also that they intervened in human affairs. Miracles, then, did not present a problem to the early Christians as they attempted to explain and relate their faith to the culture around them.

In understanding miracles it is important to bear in mind that the biblical concept of a miracle is that of an event which runs counter to the observed processes of nature. The word "observed" is particularly important here. Our knowledge of nature is a limited knowledge. Clearly there may be higher laws, which remain unknown to man.

In any case, miracles are not correctly conceived of as irrational disruptions of the pattern of nature, but as only the known part of that pattern. This understanding of the biblical conception may well erode some of contemporary man's objections to miracles. It is purely a corrective to the erroneous view that miracles are complete violations of nature.

Biblical miracles have a clear objective: they are intended to bring the glory and love of God into bold relief. They are intended, among other things, to draw man's attention away from the mundane events of everyday life and direct it toward the mighty acts of God.

In the context of the OT, miracles are viewed as the direct intervention of God in human affairs, and they are unquestionably linked to His redemptive activity on behalf of man. They help to demonstrate that biblical religion is not concerned with abstract theories about God's power, but with actual historical manifestations and experiences of that power. The most significant miracle of the OT is God's action on behalf of the Hebrews in opening up the Red Sea as they escaped the Egyptians.

This miracle is the centerpiece of Hebrew history and of OT religion. It is a demonstration of God's power and love in action. And this action became the theme of much of the Hebrew religion and literature, which came after it. It was the Hebrew view that man does not know the being of God so much

as he knows the acts of God. God is therefore known as he acts on man's behalf, and the miracle at the Red Sea is the paradigm of God's acting.

This emphasis on miracles as the redemptive activity of God is continued in the NT, where they are a part of the proclamation of the good news that God has acted ultimately on man's behalf in the coming of Jesus Christ into history. Miracles are a manifestation of the power that God will use to restore all of creation on its proper order, to restore the image of God in man to its full expression, and to destroy death. Again we see the theme of biblical religion as centered not on theory but on action.

MIRACLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The central miracle of the NT, indeed of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, is the resurrection of Christ. Every book in the NT Canon claims, proclaims or assumes the resurrection of Christ on the third day after His crucifixion. It is discussed thoroughly in each Gospel and is declared by Paul in I Corinthians 15 to be the keystone of Christian faith. The reference to it in I Corinthians is much earlier (in date) than those of the Gospels.

When the ancient acceptance of miracles is considered along with the wholly depressing circumstances surrounding the ending of Jesus' mission on the day He was crucified, it can be seen that the best evidence for the resurrection is the existence, energy, and growth of the early Church itself. After the crucifixion the apostles were utterly defeated persons, and their movement was sputtering to a humiliating stop. They were completely without hope after watching Jesus die as a criminal.

Yet within a few weeks these same men were boldly proclaiming Christ's resurrection to the very people who had brought about the condemnation of Christ. They were preaching that Jesus was the risen Lord to any and to all. And these apostles were normal, rational, sane men. Individually and corporately they had undergone a dramatic change after the crucifixion, from depressed, insecure, and despairing men to confident and bold preachers. Surely it is reasonable, on almost any criterion of reasonableness, to consider that witnessing the risen Christ was what brought about this dramatic change.

It should also be noted that one of the earliest acts of Christian worship was the breaking of bread with its attendant symbolism of Christ's broken body. This phenomenon would be unexplainable without the knowledge of the risen Christ, unless, that is, one wishes to dismiss the early apostles as irrational masochists, which they clearly were not.

It should be clear then that the central miracle of NT religion is the resurrection of Christ. Without this miracle the early church would not have come into being, and we who live in the twentieth century would no doubt never have heard of the other NT miracles. Indeed, we would probably never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth, who would have been forgotten along with hundreds of other obscure preachers and miracle workers who wandered about the ancient Middle East.

The Gospels teach that the significance of all the miracles of Christ is that they are the prophesied works of the Messiah. The miracles are signs rather than merely wonderful works. They are, however, signs only to those who have the spiritual discernment to recognize them as such. Without the enlightenment that accompanies Christian commitment they are only "wonders," or wonderful works, and their true theological significance cannot be recognized.

Belief in the biblical miracles has always been a central feature of Christian faith, and this remains the case in the twentieth century. Christian faith is informed by the revelation of God to man in Scripture and

in the mighty acts recorded there. Christian faith is not to be conformed to the culture around it but is intended to be a transforming influence in the midst of its cultural milieu. The continuing work of the church in the world may itself be viewed as evidence for the truth of the biblical concept of miracle. Certainly the Christian's experience of God as Redeemer and Sustainer is the experience of miracle. It renders the posture of skepticism untenable.

We do not need miracles for 3 reasons: First the gift is history, Secondly the functions of the prophets and miracles workers is over, and thirdly, the Bible is already complete.