

# MIRACLES IN THE SCRIPTURES

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## PREAMBLE:

Christianity is a religion of miracles. The historical origin of its founder is itself miraculous. Also in the course of his ministry, Jesus performed miracles to assure us that the kingdom of God is already in our midst (Mk.9:1). Thus miracles form an integral part of the christian religion: Affirming this, Christ states that: 'These (miracles) are the signs that will be associated with believers: in my name they will cast out devils, they will have the gift of tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison; they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover' (Mk. 16:17 - 18, ICor. 12:28).

In theological lexicon, the concept miracle is not new, it is as old as christianity, and even dates back to the Old Testament. In a general sense it is an intervention of God in the course of history or nature. To be able to appraise 'miracle' or better still, miracle in the scripture, knowledge of the situation before the intervention is necessary. Miracle is without any meaning except one can decipher the difference in the operation of nature.

## MIRACLE AND THE LAW OF NATURE

Miracle is

...an extraordinary event, perceptible to the senses, produced by God in a religious context as a sign of the supernatural.<sup>1</sup>

It is a phenomenon in nature which transcends the capacity of natural causes. To discover miracles one has to have the basic knowledge of the laws of nature. This is because nothing is extraordinary until you have discovered what is ordinary. As a matter of fact, if you have not yet noticed that the sun appears in the East and owing to the rotation of the earth sets in the West, you will see nothing miraculous about it appearing one morning in the West. Thus to decipher miracles, the knowledge of natural laws is necessary. C.S. Lewis put it succinctly thus:

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\*St. Joseph Major Seminary Ikot Ekpene.

Belief in miracles, far from depending on an ignorance of the laws of nature is only possible in so far as those laws are known.<sup>2</sup>

While a miracle is extraordinary, natural laws are ordinary. Nature from ordinary parlance is what happens of itself or "of its own accord" - What you do not need to labour for; what you will get if you take. Often, it is not reasonable but is guided and directed by "Eternal Reason". Also, it lacks free will and is static. The laws of nature are formulated from the observable facts of nature, and any violation of these laws is miracle as David Hume would surmise.

C. S. Lewis, gave a classical conception of the law of nature from three perspectives:

1. That they are mere brute facts, known only by observation, with no discoverable rhyme or reason about them....
2. That they are applications of the law of averages....
3. That the fundamental laws of physics are really what we call "necessary truths", like the truths of mathematics....<sup>4</sup>

The problem and possibility of miracle hinges on the third conception. The first and second can be waved aside simply by arguing that if we have no idea why a thing or event happens, then we cannot deduce any reason why it should not be otherwise. The third notion is difficult as any objection or violation leads to contradictions.

Miracle is not a violation of the laws of nature<sup>5</sup>, as Hume defines it, it is rather as defined by Richard Swinburne 'an event of an extraordinary kind, brought about by God and of religious significance'.<sup>6</sup> A miracle is not a violation, because God is the source of both. He cannot contradict himself. Thus it is not contrary to nature - it is *praeter naturam* and not *contra naturam*, as the Scholastics hold. Thomas Aquinas confirms

.... that to be a miracle an event had to be such as to be beyond the natural power of any created thing to produce.<sup>7</sup>

By miracles we do not mean that they are contradictions, we rather mean that, left to her own resources, she (nature) would not produce them. As a sure proof that miracles are not violations its results follow according to the law of natural. According to C. S. Lewis.

Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested.

It must be noted that,  
The divine act of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern. It does not violate the laws proviso.<sup>8</sup>

One major reason why we accept that miracles happen is because nature "is not the whole reality but only a part,... of that which is outsider her wishes to invade her, she has, so far as we can see, no defences."<sup>9</sup>

Miracle differs from Magic. Miracle is wrought by God and has a religious significance, whereas magic is not. In confirmation Maurice Zundel states, "every miracle performed by God has a spiritual aim, (i.e, the perfect realisation of the kingdom).<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, it differs from healing on the point of duration. "Miracle happens instantaneously, healing is gradual".<sup>11</sup> And one common thing between them is: Faith is required for both to take place.

## MIRACLES IN THE SCRIPTURE

The scripture is divided into two parts, namely Old Testament and New Testament. In this discussion we shall treat miracle as it is understood in each part.

### OLD TESTAMENT:

It is important to note that, in the Old Testament times there was no unified conception of 'nature', even there was no single word that is equivalent to 'Nature'. For instance, the people of Israel regarded natural phenomena as the operations of a single divine personal being. Nature for them means Yahweh manifesting himself to them. In a nutshell, John Mackenzie states this juxtaposition and misconception of nature not as a unified system thus:

The Old Testament conception of nature is that it exhibits the constant activity of Yahweh directed by his providence toward men.<sup>12</sup>

In short, the whole lot of nature is personalised. Due to this inability

to distinguish nature, the Israelites were not so much interested in exploiting the extraordinary (miracles), since all things for them is miraculous. In the New Catholic Encyclopedia we read that:

The Israelites having no idea of a fixed unchangeable natural law governing the physical universe, was not interested in the intimate nature of a miracle; for him it was a proof of God's merciful providence for some specific purpose, which he tried to grasp and understand.<sup>13</sup>

Strictly speaking there are three words in the Old Testament used to signify the marvelous. These are, *ôl*, which means sign, that is something which attracts attention, as we can see in Gen. 9:13. "I now set my bow in the clouds and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth". (Cf also Ex. 4:9; Jgs. 6:17; Is.38:3-9). Also the word *mopet*, meaning a wonder or potent, often a sign of a future event, is used to designate the marvelous as "that day your mouth will be opened to speak to the survivors; you will speak and no longer be dumb.... (Ez. 24:27, Dt. 13:2f, Ps. 71:7). Lastly the word *parā'* is used. This means to surpass the ordinary or the expected, as we can find in Ps. 131:1: "Yahweh, my heart is not haughty, I do not set my sight too high. I have taken no part in great affairs, in wonders beyond my scope" (Cf also Prov. 30:8, Job 42:3, Is.29:14). These words are also inadequate for what we know as miracle today.

In the Old Testament these signs and wonders are wrought by God who is active in history. Through them, God manifests and reveals himself to His people as one who is powerful, marvelous and wonderful, since, the whole nature is under his rule - He twists and adjusts nature to his test. In short, it proves to them that he is the Lord and master of nature. Some of these miracles or wonders performed by God in the Old Testament include the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 14:15 - 31), the proofs of Moses' commission (Ex.4:9, 28,3). As a wonder or 'mopet', it means abnormal things happening, like the strange conduct of Isaiah when he went about naked and bare feet (Is. 20:3). Also, the Israelites regarded what surpass the ordinary or expected as miracles, like the crossing of the Jordan (Jos. 3:5), the plagues of Egypt, of things which surpass human understanding (Pr. 30:8, Ps. 131:1; Job 42:3). All these show that these words do not qualify for 'miracle', rather this conception is an exposition of the people's ignorance of physical laws and physical courses. Some of

these miracles narrated can be better explained through the knowledge of nature, and its laws of operation. The Israelites in the early period had no sound knowledge of nature.

Due to this lack, it is not easy to decipher and distinguish between mere sign and miracle in the Old Testament. While some of these accounts are miracles, others are mere signs: like the joining of two sticks of Ezekiel (Cf Ez. 37:15 - 28).

The Israelites over emphasized this aspect because they were more interested in discovering the reality of God in nature. Thus, their primary aim was not to establish faith in miracle, but faith in Yahweh who performed these wonders. As rightly stated,

In the Hebrew conception, the traditions exhibit not so much faith in "miracle", an unknown concept, but a faith in Yahweh as the Lord of history and the Lord of nature, who bends nature to His purposes in history.<sup>14</sup>

#### (B) NEW TESTAMENT:

Just as there is no word for miracle in the Old Testament, so there is no corresponding word to miracle in its strict sense in the New Testament. Affirming this assertion, the New Catholic Encyclopedia states:

There is no term in the Bible that corresponds to miracle in its strict theological meaning. The Latin word 'miraculum' is absent in the Vulgate New Testament and occurs only six times in the Vulgate Old Testament for a number of Hebrew terms for wondrous acts or events, not necessarily miraculeus in the ordinary sense.<sup>15</sup>

However, in the New Testament, the most common designation of miracle is 'dynamis' that is 'Power' or the works of power. It shows that the power of God is at work. Principally, this is not the power of God to work wonders, but the power of God to save (Rom. 1:16; ICor. I:18, Luke 5:17). This is the beginning of the kingdom of God or the 'Messianic age'. This intervention means '... God regnant and redeeming. It is his reign becoming manifestly effective in human affairs. It is God visiting and redeeming his people, as he has promised long ago'.<sup>16</sup>

The New Testament presents Jesus thus 'he went about doing good'

(Act 10:38). The first and primary good is the preaching of the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-15). One of the means he used in establishing this kingdom is through miracles. Through them we have a foretaste of the kingdom not yet realised. Hence he cured the sick, (Mk.2:1 - 12; 3:1-6; Matt. 8:14 - 17). cast out Demons (Matt.8:28-34, Mk.6:53-56; Lk.9:37-43), fed the hungry (Mk.6:30-44). He had control of nature as he walked on the sea (Mk.6:45-52), calms the storm (Matt.8:23-27).

The miracles of Jesus formed an integral part with His mission. It cannot be separated from this noble mission because they,

announce and inaugurate what the future will be like .... the miracles are illustrations of the kingdom which he proclaimed.<sup>17</sup>

According to A.M. Hunter, 'miracles were the kingdom of God in action (Lk. 7:22). Through these, we know that the kingdom is already among us (Lk.17:21, Mk. 9:1; Lk.II:20).

Miracles performed by Jesus have certain peculiarity. Faith is required for any miracle, either directly or indirectly (Matt. 13:58). He performed miracles only where he was accepted, so that people will believe. At the end of each miracle, the result is that people are astonished, filled with awe, joyful because they are left better than they were before.

Miracles performed can be classified in various ways. Some classify them as 'miracles of Old covenant' and 'miracles of New covenant'. Similar group classify this as 'nature miracles' and 'healing miracles'. On the contrary some theologians distinguish three classes of miracles: miracle with regard to substance, with regard to subject, and miracle with regard to mode. Among this classification, the most acclaimed is that of nature and healing miracles. Nature miracles include miracles that touch directly on the natural operation. This includes Lk.9:10-17: miracle of the loaves; Mk.6:45-52; Jesus walks on the sea. The healing miracles are cures effected by Christ. The gospel of Mark especially the first part contains a lot of this. It must be noted that:

The miracle of healing are symbols of Christ's power to cure the spiritual sickness of sin, as for instance, the miraculous draught of fishes represents the missionary work of the Church. The multiplication of the loaves and fishes is a symbol of the Eucharist and of the unlimited power of Christ to provide for human needs.<sup>18</sup>

To show that Jesus is not a mere wonder worker (Thamaturge) when his power was put to the test, he refused to give a sign (Mk.8:12; Matt.4:5f;26:53; Lk.16:31). This shows that miracles are not mere proof of the ego, but religious sign.

### AIMS AND FUNCTIONS

The major aim of miracles is not to present Jesus or the apostles as wonder workers. According to G.H. Joyce;

The Gospel make it clear that He (Jesus) did not work His miracles purely and solely to relieve physical pain (Mk.6:5). In all of them He aimed not merely at man's temporal welfare, but at his eternal good.<sup>19</sup>

The end of miracle is outward and draws nothing to itself. Its primary purpose is to save. Thus, it has a spiritual aim or purpose. It draws men to God (Num.14:11-12, Matt. 12:22-50), and it reveals the attributes of God (Ex. 7:5,17).

Miracle is not only vertical, it has also a horizontal function. It fulfills certain functions for those it is meant. G.H. Joyce further states that:

1. They mark a person as entrusted with a divine mission and thus establish the truth of a revelation.
2. They are given to attest high sanctity. They are not, of course, essential to sanctity.....
3. They are employed to confer temporal favours to relieve suffering or sorrow.<sup>20</sup>

In all these, 'miracle becomes otiose unless it means more than an event which has some religious significance'<sup>21</sup>

### CONCLUSION

That miracles happen is an indubitable fact. To this effect M. Sheehan states:

The possibility of miracles cannot be denied by any one who admits the existence of a personal God. He who fixed the course of nature can alter, suspend or supersede it at His pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

In short, with God all things are possible, since he is the cause of all that is. That miracles happen is a true test that God is at work in history, and that he answers the prayers of man.

As rightly distinguished not all wonders are miracles. The value and worth of miracles lie in their ability to "bear the word of God and witness to the power of the Spirit for the redemption of man and the establishment of the eschatological kingdom".<sup>23</sup>

In summary, miracle outside religion is meaningless and otiose. It must have a religious or spiritual aim, and not merely for the exhibition of power. Thus, all glory that derives from it goes to God. In the actual sense, man has no direct claim, he is only an instrument used by God when the intervention is not direct.

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