

**THE PRESENT
CONTROVERSY ON
THE GOSPEL MIRACLES**

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The present controversy on the gospel miracles by F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock

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GOSPEL MIRACLES

BY

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE problem of miracles is undoubtedly the problem of to-day. During the last two years the question has reached an acute stage in the Church of England. To begin with the Middlesbro' Congress of 1912. There the two protagonists in the recent controversy, Bishop Gore and Professor Sanday, read papers in which their subsequent positions were, to some extent, foreshadowed. The Bishop laid stress upon the fact that the one great obstacle to the reconciliation of contemporary intellect with the faith was miracles. The intellectual motive for the widespread, present-day disbelief in miracle he found in the dominance of a certain philosophical or scientific conception of the world. That conception is, of a closed system of physical sequences not to be invaded by any event the system cannot explain. But even scientific men, as the Bishop pointed out, regard that conception of nature as "an abstraction practically valid for purposes of science, but never intellectually valid if it claims to be complete." He held it to be quite possible for the Christian belief to be perfectly at home with this conception of nature, provided it be not regarded as exclusive or exhaustive. The purport of the address was an appeal to men of science to get over their pre-suppositions, their prejudices against miracle, and to enlarge their views of the order of nature so as to allow room for our Lord's conception of the Father. He asked them, in short, to use Sir Oliver Lodge's distinction, to believe in *Spiritual guidance* \

as well as in *irrefragable law*¹. We may remark that it is far more difficult for any one who believes in the God of the New Testament to regard His power as restrained or exhausted by the order of physical nature than it is for the scientific mind to enlarge its conception of the order of life. The latter is surely more than mechanical or material. It must involve consciousness and thought and will, otherwise it could not be directed, much less known. The scientific axioms which appear to be opposed to miracle are the law of the conservation of energy and the uniformity of natural law. The former of these, as Sir Oliver Lodge has shown, is not contravened by a directing influence such as that of the mind or will which "affects the *quantity* of energy no whit."² Bergson's creative consciousness also controls matter. The latter is a purely mental abstraction, and therefore an impossibility in a world of purely physical energy or movement; while it is called in question by the catastrophes in nature and the complexities of the atom.³

On the other hand, Dr. Sanday in the same discussion seemed to regard the historical evidence for miracle as the weak point. "The whole problem of miracle," he said, "seems to me to reduce itself to this: To find the exact point at which the supernatural ends and the really abnormal begins; to determine in any particular case exactly what amount of allowance has to be made and to reconstruct the narrative as best we can, and as far as we can accordingly." What we are called upon to settle then is this: How much of the record is

¹ *Men and the Universe*, p. 62.

² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³ See Prof. Planck's address as Rector of Berlin University, 1913, translated and quoted by Canon McClure in *Modern Substitutes*, p. 146.

true, and how much is symbolical; how much is due to the faulty observation of the observer, and how much to the fervid imagination of the scribe, and to the Old Testament moulds and types of thought. The problem of miracle is, accordingly, one of evidence. "After the Congress," he says, "the progress of my thought was rapid. I soon realized that it was once more a question of the balance of evidence" (p. 24). In his last utterance, in which he replied to Bishop Gore's *Challenge to Criticism*, and in which his tendency to the Modernist position is somewhat—and we hope but temporarily—pronounced, he again insists that it is a matter of evidence. "I was not disposed," he writes, "to put any limit to the Divine power or to ascribe any necessity to natural law as such. I did not for a moment doubt the power of God to make what exceptions He pleased, *I only asked for better evidence of His will to make them*" (p. 22). He then proceeds to remark that there was "a certain amount of ostensible evidence," but, "in the light of historical criticism this evidence seemed little by little to fall to pieces." It was first given up over the whole field of profane history. There is also a strong feeling that it has also given way for the Old Testament. There was abundant evidence for the operation of higher spiritual causes, but when it came to a breach of the physical order, *the evidence was always found to be insufficient* (p. 23). Owing to this insufficiency of evidence for what he terms "a breach of the physical order," he draws a distinction—which has since been challenged by many, Dean Inge and Mr. Lacey particularly, as a return to an obsolete Dualism—between events that are *supra naturam* and those that are *contra naturam*. The latter class, he says, "involve some definite reversal of the natural physical order," while

the former class consists of events "extraordinary, exceptional and testifying to the presence of higher spiritual forces." These latter he admits, for "they involved no real breach in the order of nature," and "were abundantly accounted for by the presence in the world of an unique Personality, and by that wave of new spiritual force which flowed from it in an ever-increasing volume" (p. 24).

With regard to his group of events *contra naturam*, which might more correctly be styled *contra naturam quoad nobis notam*, he says "The conception of such miracles took its rise in the region of the Old Testament" (p. 26), "they came to be attributed to Him in this form by the imagination of the early Church," and in most of these cases *something* happened which gave rise to the story" (p. 19). There remain, accordingly, in this class "only the two great events—the Supernatural beginning and the Supernatural ending of the Lord's earthly career." He remarks that "it would be only *human* (!) if the records that have come down to us presented some exaggerations in detail" (p. 26). He affirms his entire belief in the central reality of the Supernatural birth and the Supernatural Resurrection. His belief in the former, however, is qualified by the statement, "I cannot so easily bring myself to think that His Birth was (as I should regard it) unnatural"; and with regard to the latter he asserts that "the Risen Lord as Spirit still governed and inspired His Church," but that the accounts that have come down to us seem to be "too conflicting and confused to prove the actual resuscitation of the dead body of the Lord from the tomb" (p. 20). He concludes by saying, "If it is said that what I have written is Modernism, I would reply that I believe—I emphatically and hopefully believe—that a sound and right Modernism is really

possible; that the Saviour of mankind extends His arms towards the cultivated modern man just as much as He does towards the simple believer."

Whatever we may think of the Professor's attitude to our historic faith, we cannot but regard this attempt to reconcile contemporary intellect with the faith as honest and sincere, although there lies at its basis the grave confusion of an historical religion with a philosophical system. The latter is purely subjective. We have no standard of testing how far it explains or corresponds with the objective world of fact, or how far it expresses the whole truth as God sees it. We can only judge how far we think it does. On the other hand, an historical religion rests upon an objective basis, and must totter when based on facts which are proved by science to be untrue or by criticism to be without evidence. Accordingly, we shall attempt in the following pages to prove (1) that miracles do not conflict necessarily with a rational and complete view of the world—that is, that miracles are not impossible in the abstract; and (2) that there is reliable documentary evidence for them. This will involve to some extent an examination of the positions of Rationalism, Ritschlianism, and Modernism. Both the latter "isms" are phases of Rationalism within the sphere of Christianity. Modernism¹ is certainly a Rationalist movement which began within the pale of the Roman Church in France just ten years ago, with the publication of M. Loisy's work *L'Évangile et l'Église*. His position is that the Christ of the Synoptics is historical but not Divine, whereas the Johannine Christ is Divine but not historical. He has been followed in his rambling by Father Tyrrell and others. The

¹ For a good account of Modernism see Canon McClure's *Modern Substitutes for Traditional Christianity*, p. 147-224.