

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE IX.

## THE RELATION OF THE MIRACLE TO NATURE.

BY PROFESSOR WILLIAM BRENTON GREENE, JR., D.D.

THIS is not a question as to the reality of the Supernatural. The reality of the Supernatural is involved in the very conception of the natural. So long as nature is regarded as beginning, it does and must presuppose an eternal, and therefore supernatural, cause; so long as nature is considered as mutable, it does and must imply an immutable, and consequently supernatural, ground: and that nature must be viewed both as beginning and as mutable, such is the latest dictum of all science and of all philosophy worthy of the name. Thus, Spencer says: "The axiomatic truths of physical science unavoidably postulate Absolute Being as their common basis";<sup>1</sup> and Fichte writes: "We must end at last by resting all existence which demands an extrinsic foundation upon Being the fountain of whose life is within himself; by allying the fugitive phenomena which color the stream of time with ever-changing hues to an eternal and unchanging essence"; and Lindsay concludes: "We may surely say that it has become more clearly manifest that what thought as to the Primal Reality known as God testifies to is, above all else, the fact that such Inscrutable Reality, or the Unknowable, does undoubtedly exist."<sup>2</sup> In a word, the reality of the Supernatural is the necessity of consistent thought.

Nor does the question under consideration refer to the mani-

<sup>1</sup> *First Principles*, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> *Recent Advances in Theistic Philosophy*, p. 5.

festation of the Supernatural. If the Supernatural be, as we have just seen, both the cause and the ground of the natural, then he must have manifested himself, and he must still manifest himself, in the natural. A cause cannot but express itself more or less in its effect. Even if an artisan strive to have his workmanship misrepresent him, it will yet indicate, it cannot but indicate, his skill in misrepresentation. Nor will it be otherwise, if the Supreme Cause be conceived as acting vitally rather than mechanically. The plant must be the embodiment, and so the revelation, of its life. It is the same, if the Supernatural be regarded as the ground of the natural. The skyscraper may represent only most partially the solidity of the rock on which it rests, but it must disclose solidity equal to the support of its own vast mass. Hence, while the Scriptures speak of God as essentially unknowable, they, nevertheless, declare that "the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity."<sup>1</sup> Whatever theory of the universe, therefore, we may adopt, be it creation or evolution, we must behold in the natural the manifestation of its Supernatural Cause and Ground. However partial, this manifestation cannot but be as real as must be the Supernatural himself. If there be reality at all, such must be the case.

Nor, once more, does the question before us concern the general providence of God. The denial of miracles is not the denial of the immanent divine concursus, by virtue of which the world-order is a providential order. A universe which demands a supernatural cause and ground will continue to demand a supernatural preserver and governor. Deism in every form involves at last the impossibility and the absurdity

<sup>1</sup> Rom. i. 20.

that the finite and mutable, when once it has been instituted, can get along without the Infinite and Immutable, the Supernatural. Though the universe were constituted self-running and self-developing, so long as it were itself merely natural, it could remain perfectly self-running and self-developing, and so it could be permanently self-running and self-developing at all, only as it lived and moved and had its being in God. In a word, the continued and constant manifestation of the Supernatural are as clearly involved in the reality of the world as are the existence and the original manifestation of the Supernatural.

Nor, again, does the question that we would discuss refer to special providences. The miracle and the special providence are not the same. That a providence is special, does not affect its essential nature. However special, it is still providence. In it, therefore, God makes use, as in general providence, only of the ordinary laws of nature. True, he so combines and utilizes these as to produce results to which they are inadequate when left to their "natural working"; that is, to their operation with his ordinary concursus. It is not exact, consequently, to say that special providences are special only as respects the effect produced on us. They are special also as regards the supernatural direction which they imply. This difference, however, is one of degree; it is not one of kind. It is like the difference between the action of the pilot when he holds the ship to her course and when, to avoid some obstacle, he turns her from her course. The problem as to the miracle, therefore, relates to special providence no more than we have seen that it refers to general providence. General providence and special providence are in essence the same.

Nor, once more, is the question that we would answer, whether the will and so the power of God are brought to bear

directly in and on nature. That they are, follows from the divine providence, be it special or merely general. The direction which providence in either form implies, involves the exercise of will, the exertion of power. Only thus can God's plan be given effect. The pilot must apply muscular force to the rudder, if he is to carry out his purpose for the ship. Hence, as Dr. W. G. T. Shedd remarks, "the laws of nature are being continually modified in their action by the intervention of the Divine will."<sup>1</sup> The variety which characterizes the general uniformity of natural phenomena is the special proof of this. Because themselves uniform, physical properties and laws would, if left to themselves, produce only fatal uniformity. Like a ship without a pilot, nature would under such circumstances simply drift. Thus physical as well as human progress must go unexplained, unless we posit the constant activity of the will and power of God. Not only does he uphold and direct all things: in the last analysis, he does this by himself *making* them to differ. All force is not divine force; but as there is no force that does not depend for its continuance on the will of God, so there is no power whose particular direction does not express his will.

Nor, finally, is the question as to the amount of the divine power which the miracle demands. It is absurd for finite man to dogmatize concerning the effort that a given effect will require of omnipotence. Degrees of difficulty are impossible in the case of him who calls the universe into being by the mere word of his power. Were they conceivable, what we judge to be the most stupendous works might well be the easiest. Even a very strong man can often spare himself by himself doing what ordinarily he gets others to do for him. From this point of view the development and administration of the universe

<sup>1</sup> Dogmatic Theology, i. 537.

through natural causes alone would be a greater exhibition of wisdom and power than would be its creation as a finished product and its exclusively supernatural preservation and government. Whatever, therefore, the essence of the miracle may be, it cannot consist in the degree of divine power which it demands.

We are, then, by a process of exclusion, shut up to the judgment that the miracle is contrasted with nature by *the way* in which the Supernatural, whose constant activity is presupposed alike in the miracle and in nature, exerts his activity. What is this way? How does God work the miracle? The answer to this question will give the relation of the miracle to nature.

One suggestion ascribes the miracle to angelic agency. God brings the miracle to pass by means of an angel, and it transcends anything that we can effect because the angels "are mighty in strength." At first sight this explanation may seem satisfactory. Doubtless, the angels have more to do with the world and in it than is commonly supposed. "They fulfill Jehovah's word"; "They are all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation." While, however, many miracles might be explained thus, the most important, because the typical, ones could not be. Such miracles as the raising of the dead, and the multiplication of the loaves, and the changing of water into wine, demand power beyond that even of an angel. For at best an angel is but a creature. How, then, could an angel give life to the dead, or call substance into being, or change the essential properties of matter? These acts all imply creative power, and how can what is itself created have this power?

Nor may it be replied that the Omnipotent One who uses the angel could impart it. This misconceives omnipotence. It is not power to do everything: it is power to do everything

consistent with itself and, therefore, with its works. It is not power, consequently, to get any service needed out of an angel: it is power to secure such service, and only such service, from an angel as is congruous with his created and so divinely limited nature. Hence, if more results from the agency of the angel than this, it must be because power other than his has been joined with his. To admit this, however, is to refer the miracle to something else than angelic agency. Nor does this overlook the fact that a good workman can get surprising results from simple and even poor tools. He cannot, however, get results contrary to the nature of the tools. No carpenter, however skillful, can make a saw do the work of a plane; and in like manner, God, though he can raise the dead by the mere word of his own power, cannot do so by means of the power even of an angel.

A second suggestion ascribes the miracle to higher laws of nature than those with which we are acquainted. God works the miracle by the agency of mysterious but purely natural forces, be they psychic or physical. Consequently, as Mr. Matthew Arnold was fond of saying, 'all the biblical miracles will at last disappear with the progress of science.' On its face this explanation is plausible. The advance of knowledge has greatly enlarged the sphere of the natural. Some of the biblical miracles, as they are ordinarily regarded, we have come to refer to it. Doubtless, this will be the case with others. We are learning daily that the powers of nature are far greater than we have supposed. In some respects we are finding nature to be more wonderful than any miracle. It is true that we cannot tell how much nature can do.

Yet, on the other hand, it is true that we know more surely than ever that there are some things which nature cannot do. If the progress of science has enlarged the sphere of nature in

certain directions, it has curtailed it in others. If it has made it possible to refer many miracles to higher laws of nature, it has made it impossible to dispose thus of some; and these are the chief miracles, the test miracles, the typical miracles. In the light of modern science, we may say, that as the division of the waters of the Red Sea so that the children of Israel could cross over on dry ground has been explained on natural principles; so, we may expect, will be the case with the miracles of healing. But it is precisely modern science, with its denial of abiogenesis, which forbids the supposition that we may yet account thus for such a miracle as the resurrection of the dead. Such a miracle implies creative power; and if nature could create, the demand for a creator would not, as we have seen, be written on every one of its lineaments.

Moreover, while many miracles could be referred to "higher laws," it is a fair question whether they should be. The power that could have effected a certain result may not be the power that has effected it. That a field of grain could be reaped, and ordinarily would be reaped, by a reaping machine, does not prove that it has not been reaped by the farmer's own hand, especially if the latter seems to have been the case, and there are evident and good reasons why it should in this instance have been the case. As Dorner well says, "The New Testament requires us to view the miracles of healing in connection with the power necessarily demanded for the other miracles,"<sup>1</sup> and "the other miracles" to which he refers are precisely those which, in the nature of things, no higher laws of nature could have affected.

A third suggestion ascribes the miracle to a provision, made by God in the original scheme of the universe, by which such an occurrence was to take place at a given moment. This,

<sup>1</sup> *System of Christian Doctrine*, II. 173.



however, while true, can be neither the whole truth nor the essential truth. Of every event it may and should be said that provision was made for it in the original constitution of nature. In so far as it should be accomplished by natural force, provision must have been made for the development by nature of this force; and in so far as it should be effected by supernatural power, the occasion must have been provided for the exercise of this power. The suggestion under consideration, therefore, fails utterly to meet the case. It does not indicate what is distinctive in the *method* of the activity of the Supernatural in the miracle as compared with his activity otherwise. As Bruce writes, "it saves miracles as events by the sacrifice of their miraculous significance."<sup>1</sup>

A fourth suggestion ascribes the miracle to the suspension or to the violation by God of some force of nature. This explanation, however, is open to at least two objections. The first is the old deistic one, that the laws of nature, being the work of God, are "very good," and, therefore, ought not to be either violated or suspended. There is much force in this. It is to conceive of God unworthily, to think of him as having constituted the world, and then as being obliged to violate or suspend its laws if it is to accomplish his original purpose. The second objection is that the method of correction proposed is simply negative, and so would be ineffective. If there were merely the violation or the suspension of law, nothing but ruin could result. Let the law of gravitation cease to operate, or to operate otherwise than it does, and the only miracle that would issue would be the destruction of the present cosmos.

Thus, again, by a process of exclusion, we are brought to what we are seeking. If, as we have seen, the miracle is contrasted with nature by the *way* in which the Supernatural,

<sup>1</sup>The Miraculous Element in the Gospels, p. 51.

whose constant activity is presupposed alike in the miracle and in nature, exerts his activity, then the distinction is that, whereas in all his other modes the Supernatural acts mediately, through angels or through natural laws, known or unknown, physical or psychic, in the miracle, be it psychic or physical, he always acts *immediately*, above natural laws and independently of them. Hence, when a miracle takes place, God, instead of bringing it about through a natural or even through a supernatural combination of natural agencies, effects it purely by his own will, solely by his own power, only with his own hand. As in mediate creation, he may work on pre-existing material, but he does not work through it. What he does in it he brings to it; he does not draw it out of it. He does not evoke life out of or through the forces still resident and active in the corpse of Lazarus: he calls back the soul of Lazarus from Hades, and he is present: and by the mere omnipotence of his will and word he commands the body that was even then stinking to come forth, and he that had been dead appears before them in all the vigor and beauty of health and life. In a word, the essence of the miracle, as of mediate creation, is creation *ex nihilo*. It is thus that the miracle is related to nature.

The limits of this article forbid any exhibition of the perfection of the correspondence between this conception of the miracle and the biblical events represented as miraculous. Neither is there opportunity to show, as could readily be shown, that this is the conception in the mind of the sacred writers. Nor yet is there space to do more than merely point out that the miracle as it has just been set forth involves no violation or even suspension of any of the laws of nature. It is above them, apart from them, independent of them. Though it accomplish results the opposite of what they would effect

by themselves, this is not because they are in any way changed or interrupted; it is only because they are transcended. When you throw a ball into the air you do not suspend gravity; still less do you reverse its operation: what you do is to introduce a new force, that of your own arm and of your own will, and a corresponding and so new effect is produced; the ball rises until the impulse which you had given to it is spent through the resistance which gravity unceasingly opposes. In like manner, when God works a miracle, he does not interfere with any, even the least, of the laws which he has constituted. He simply puts out his own omnipotent hand in nature, against which hand all the resistance of all the laws of nature would be as nothing, and for the outputting of which the laws of nature have furnished the eternally designed occasion—he simply puts out his own hand, and the result is a new work, in nature but not of it, not contrary to it but above it, and stamped with the seal of his own power.

That the implications of this conception of the relation of the miracle to nature may be understood, it should be remarked, in closing:

1. The term "mediate miracle" is clearly a misnomer. According to the late Dr. Edward Robinson, "a mediate miracle is an event wrought by natural means supernaturally applied." The distinction of the miracle, however, is, as we have just seen, that it is not wrought by natural means, but directly and solely by the Supernatural himself. In the case of what is called the mediate miracle, we see God personally directing his machine. In the case of the true miracle we see God himself at work with his own hand only. The two events thus belong to totally different classes. The one may be as much beyond the power of mere nature as the other; but while the one comes out of nature at the divine impulse, the other

comes down into nature as a purely divine impulse. Hence, they should be sharply distinguished. The mediate miracle is a special providence. It is not a miracle at all. Of all natural events it has the largest supernatural element, but the true miracle is wholly and only supernatural.

2. The term "relative miracle" is also a misnomer. A relative miracle is an event which we take to be miraculous simply because of our ignorance. It seems to us to be due to the immediate exercise of God's power; but if we understood it, we should see that it was as natural as any other event. The underlying conception is that the universe consists of various kingdoms, ranged one above another, the kingdom of inanimate matter, the kingdom of vegetable life, the kingdom of animal life, the kingdom of human intelligence, the kingdom of God. Now what is natural in each one of these kingdoms is supernatural when viewed from the kingdom beneath it. Life is a miracle from the level of the mineral kingdom; human thought, from the level of the lower animal world; the immediate works of God, from the human level; yet in each case that which is miracle seen from below is natural contemplated on its own plane. Thus there are no absolute or real miracles, and what is most supernatural to us must be most natural to God. This latter statement is true, but it misses the point. The question as to miracles is not one as to appearances or as to opinions, but as to facts. It is not whether miracles seem to have been wrought, but whether they have been wrought. It is not whether the supernatural would appear natural to us if we were supernatural, but whether the difference between the supernatural and the natural is one of kind rather than one of degree merely. In the last analysis the view under consideration denies what we have seen to be the first necessity of thought; viz., the reality and uniqueness of the

Supernatural. In a word, the term "relative miracle" implies the identity of the Supernatural with the natural.

3. Equally aside from the point is Bushnell's conception of the miracle as an event the distinction of which is that it has been brought about by spiritual energy. It is the product not of the forces resident in the physical universe, but of pure will. Now this is true, but it is not the truth needed. The trouble with Bushnell's conception is that it is too broad. According to him, angels, devils, men, work miracles as well as God and as truly as God. That is to say, if he does not identify God with physical nature, he does put him in the same class with spiritual nature. Now this is contrary to fact. We are spirits. Yet nothing is so characteristic of man as his sense of absolute dependence on the Supernatural. It is this that makes him *the* religious animal, and that he is *the* religious animal is his chief distinction from other animals. To find the essence of the miracle, therefore, in this, that it is due to the immediate exercise of will power, is to leave unanswered the very question which needs to be answered, viz., whose and what kind of will power, or else it is to give the lie to that sense of finiteness which is, perhaps, the deepest fact in the human consciousness.

4. Equally misleading is the conception of the miracle as out of relation to law, and so as disorderly. The miracle is not out of relation to law. It takes place under and in accord with supernatural law. Though it is something which there is no natural law to produce, and no natural law to govern, but which is the direct act of God himself, it is perfectly natural to him. It is as natural to him as it is for us to act in a purely personal manner rather than through others or by means of machinery. God would not be God, could he not act thus. Neither could he be God, had

he formed a plan and created a universe which would afford no occasion for such directly personal action. It is the law of personal life to express itself personally; and since God is the highest form of personality, it is not to be supposed that he will tie his own hands.

Nor is the miracle a disorderly event even as regards the sphere of nature. That is, it need not, and indeed cannot, introduce disorder into it. This it would do, were it, as we have seen that it is not, either a violation or a suspension of natural law. Being, however, the introduction of a new and independent force in nature, it inserts a new effect in it, and so modifies it to this extent, but without disturbing its operation. Thus the raising of Lazarus from the dead added to the human race a man who was unique in that he had been dead, but it would not have even arrested the decomposition of any other corpse, had there been any in the sepulchre, nor did it deliver Lazarus himself from the law of death in the future. And we can see, not only how this could be, but why it must be. Though the miracle is not from nature, it is directly from the absolutely self-consistent Author of nature. Did the miracle, therefore, introduce disorder into it, he would deny himself; and "he cannot deny himself."

5. It is incorrect, also, to regard the function of the miracle as a sign as its distinguishing characteristic. There are other signs. All nature and every object in it is a sign of God's "everlasting power and divinity." It is a sign, too, which many discern. The pious man finds "sermons in stones, books in the running brooks, and good," or God, "in everything." The special providence is always, except to those who are spiritually blind, a very striking sign of the wisdom and power of God. That at the stretching out of Moses' hand over the Red Sea the Lord should have "caused the sea to go back by a

strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land" for the children of Israel was, and was regarded by them as, conclusive evidence of his interposition in their history. It is not, therefore, sufficiently precise to define the miracle only as "a sign." We need to inquire further, Of what is it a sign? and, How is it a sign? And when we see that the miracle is used always to authenticate the bearer of a direct revelation from God, and that it does authenticate him by an act so evidently due to God's immediate power as to compel the conviction, that "no man could do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him," we shall feel that, while an event to be a true miracle must also be a sign, it is in its relation to nature, in the fact that it is wrought directly and solely by God's own power, his own arm, his will alone, that we have the most significant mark of the miracle.

6. Finally, what is to be said of the tendency of the attempt to explain many of the events in the Old Testament formerly regarded as miracles as special providence? We may not say that this is a tendency to eliminate the Supernatural from the biblical history. Though not wholly and, therefore, so strikingly supernatural as the miracle, the special providence implies as evidently and as necessarily the supernatural. That the coincidences in which it consists should be the result of chance, rather than of supernatural prevision and combination, cannot be accepted by a reflecting mind. Chance never exhibits purpose, and in all cases the same high and holy purpose. When the ship turns from her course just as a rock looms up before her, it does not weaken our conviction that a pilot is at the helm to learn that the ship has been turned by the pressure of her rudder against the waves. The question is, How came the pressure then and there? and there is no satisfactory explanation but the directing hand of the pilot.

Nor, again, need the tendency under consideration be hostile to the miraculous. It will not be so long as the reality and the necessity of the miracle are still affirmed. The number of miracles may be reduced in the interest of correct classification quite as much as in the interest of antisupernaturalism; and if the former be the case, the position of the miracles remaining will be strengthened rather than weakened. In the end, every concession to the truth will add a buttress to the truth. How this should be in this instance, it is easy to see. Nothing is more characteristic of the biblical miracles than the economy with which they are used. This is so, whether we conceive of them as strictly as the present article would do, or loosely. It is still true that they occur only at certain great and decisive epochs in the development of the divine plan of redemption, and that even at these epochs their employment is marked by sobriety and restraint in most striking contrast with all alleged extrabiblical miracles.

We believe that when all the facts shall be known, and all the distinctions which they imply recognized, it will be found that miracles have been wrought only to authenticate the bearers of supernatural revelation, and to authenticate them only in connection with the actual delivery of such revelation. It would certainly seem to be most appropriate that as all nature attests the divine preservation and the divine government, and as to-day, and notably at the crises of history, we see providence so special as to evince unmistakably the direct intervention of the guiding hand of God; so when a revelation from heaven is really being given, the dull minds of men should be compelled to discern and attend to it by works so evidently due to divine power alone as to demonstrate that the speaker thus authenticated must bring a message directly from God himself. Were this so, it would explain why miracles cluster most



around the person and in connection with the preaching of Christ. He was not only in a special sense the messenger sent from the Father; he was also the message itself: he was "the truth" itself as well as the revealer of it. What more fitting, not to say necessary, therefore, than that so many of his works should be miraculous and his person the greatest of all miracles? In this view of the subject, the tendency to distinguish between the miracle and the special providence is even decidedly in favor of the former. Though it reduces the number of the miracles, it exalts them to a position of unique dignity and worth.