

# Miracles in Church History

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## Introduction

I should like to begin this paper by defining my terms, and making clear what basic presuppositions I hold as I approach the subject.

*Miracles* can rightly be understood widely, to include many and varied manifestations of the extraordinary, such as dreams and visions, prophecy, prediction and 'second sight', speaking in tongues and its interpretation, marvellously timed provision of funds in response to faith, and so on. I propose, however, to confine my investigation to a narrower range of miracles of *action*—healing, casting out of evil spirits, raising the dead, and other such miraculous events, including 'nature-miracles', as might be summed up by the New Testament term 'signs and wonders'.

*Church History* includes the full sweep of Christian history from the time of Christ up to and including modern times, but in view of the scope proposed for other papers at this Conference,<sup>1</sup> and the nature of the source-material to which I have ready access, I shall concentrate on the first millenium, from the Patristic period onwards, and touch only briefly on events before or since.

## Presuppositions

A historian has his own criteria for judging whether an account comes from a reliable source, but where miracles are involved, a prior value-judgment is also called for. As C.S. Lewis puts it:

the historical evidence cannot be estimated unless we have first estimated the intrinsic probability of a recorded event. It is in making that estimate that our sense of fitness comes into play.<sup>2</sup>

I therefore have at the outset to face the question: Do I feel it fitting that miracles should have taken place, not only during, but after New Testament times?

I grew up in a sceptical age when people tended to explain away supernatural events as outworn superstition. The general apologetic stance of Evangelical Christians was that the miracles of Christ were to be accepted because he was the unique Son of God, and those of the Apostles because they were specially endowed. Any other miracles claimed should be treated with a hundred percent scepticism unless indubitably proved. Even as late as 1962 we find this written:

The New Testament miracles were distinct from any subsequent ones by virtue of their immediate connection with the full manifestation of the incarnate Son of God, with a revelation then given in its fulness. They do not therefore afford grounds in themselves for expecting miracles to accompany the subsequent dissemination of the revelation of which they formed an integral part.<sup>3</sup>

There is a changed climate of opinion today, mainly for two reasons. One is the growth of Satanism and obsession with the occult—it is recognized now by many Christians that supernatural evil cannot be written off as the figment of a superstitious imagination: it can only be met and conquered by the greater supernatural power of God. The other is the flowering of the Charismatic Movement, and the well-attested evidence that healing and other supernatural gifts have been renewed in the Church in our day.

My own personal attitude is one of hospitality to the occurrence of miracles throughout the course of Church history. On the basis of the New Testament evidence, as I understand it, I would make the following points:

1. *Miracle-working power came to Jesus from God the Father through the Holy Spirit.*

We have helpful pointers to this in Peter's teaching:

Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, *which God did among you through him.*<sup>4</sup> *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and . . . he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*<sup>5</sup>

Luke the Evangelist prefaces thus the story of the healing of the paralytic:

*The power of the Lord was present for (Jesus) to heal the sick.*<sup>6</sup>

Jesus himself ascribed his healing power to the Father when he called it 'the work of him who sent me',<sup>7</sup> and spoke of the power by which he cast out evil spirits by using a vivid metaphor 'the finger of God',<sup>8</sup> which is interpreted by Matthew to mean 'the Spirit of God'.<sup>9</sup>

These statements attribute Jesus' miracle-working power to God, or specifically to God the Father through the Holy Spirit. It is true that Jesus was 'accredited by God'<sup>10</sup> as his Son by the miracles, though of themselves they did not compel belief. It would, however, be in accordance with the evidence to say that God worked miracles through Jesus, not because of his latent Divinity, but because of his perfect humanity and full and complete communion with his Heavenly Father. As Westcott put it:

As far as it is revealed to us, His greatest works during His earthly life are wrought by the help of the Father through the energy of a humanity enabled to do all things in fellowship with God.<sup>11</sup>

We could rightly alter the Baptist's words to apply to Christ's miracles:

The one whom God has sent *does the works* of God; to him God gives the Spirit without limit.<sup>12</sup>

On the negative side, Jesus 'could not do any miracles' in Nazareth because of the people's 'lack of faith',<sup>13</sup> and in general we could say of the situation there: 'The power of the Lord was *not* present to heal.'

If Jesus' miracle-working power came from his Father through the Holy Spirit, then the claim that his followers can be similarly empowered is not a challenge to his uniqueness, or his Sonship, or his Divinity. We must, however, recognize that no one else is sinless, or has perfect faith, or is in complete communion with God; and while God's gracious gifts are not limited by our deserving, this qualification may affect the number and the nature of the miracles that God does through others.

2. *Miracles are Divine acts demonstrating that the Kingdom of God has come, and that Satan's hold over people is being attacked.* Jesus said:

If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.<sup>14</sup>

and when he sent out his disciples on mission, he instructed them:

As you go, preach this message: 'the kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.<sup>15</sup>

Karl Barth put it this way:

The Gospel records of the miracles and acts of Jesus are not just formal proofs of His Messiahship, of His Divine mission, authority, and power, but as such they are objective manifestations of His character as the conqueror not only of sin but of evil and death, as the destroyer of the destroyer, as the Saviour in the most inclusive sense.<sup>16</sup>

Peter, as we already saw, claimed that Jesus 'went around . . . healing all who were under the power of the devil.'<sup>17</sup> While on the one hand we have to make a distinction between disease and devil-possession, there is at the same time a real sense in which they are both the work of the Devil, and healing and raising the dead as well as exorcism can be a victory over the power of evil. In Jesus' case they were both

works of anger against evil, and compassion for its victims.<sup>18</sup> It would therefore be fitting for miracles of this nature to recur during these Last Days, particularly in connexion with the preaching of the Gospel in new places, and especially where occult powers are strong.

3. *Miracles are only a foretaste of the Kingdom in its fulness.* As we have already seen, the power to work miracles is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul lists 'gifts of healing' and 'miraculous powers' among these gifts.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, the Holy Spirit is described as 'a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come', or as Weymouth translates, 'a pledge and foretaste of future blessing'.<sup>20</sup> The picture is of someone putting down the first instalment of a payment, at once part of the payment, and a guarantee that the rest will be paid. We mistake when we treat the Spirit and his gifts as though we had the right to expect the full payment now, in this life. As Tom Smail puts it:

Charismatics are constantly tempted to seek a costless triumph whereby they receive all the kingdoms of the world and their glory in an easier way than God's way, and so inevitably at another hand than God's hand.<sup>21</sup>

It is consonant with the conception of 'foretaste' that while some may be healed, not all are healed. It is fitting that we should find miracles in the course of Church history, but not fitting that they should be happening all the time. This brings us to our last point:

4. *Miraculous deliverance from persecution is the exception, not the rule.* Here the sequence of events in Acts chapters 3 to 5 is very instructive. It begins with the miraculous healing of a lame man, and the arrest and threatening of Peter and John. The Apostles then pray:

Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your servant Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

The prayer was answered—there is reference to the boldness in 4:31 and to the miraculous signs and wonders in 5:12–16. The Apostles were again arrested, and confined in jail (5:18) but miraculously released by an angel (5:19). The miracle probably influenced Gamaliel's advice not to put them to death, but did not prevent their suffering a severe flogging. They came from the flogging 'rejoicing'—God had not prevented them from suffering, but had been with them in it.

## **Miracles in the Early Church—The Age of the Fathers**

In the Acts of the Apostles many miracles of healing and exorcism are recorded, and two cases of the dead being raised. Two miraculous deliverances from prison are mentioned. It is clear that these are only

examples of what happened often—we find general statements on miracles by Peter and the Apostles in Acts 5:12–16; by Philip in Acts 8:6, 13; and by Paul in Acts 19:11–16. In II Corinthians 12:12 Paul speaks generally of miracles and wonders performed in Corinth during his ministry there, and in Galatians 3:5 of the Spirit who had worked miracles among the Galatians. In Mark 16:17–20 the signs promised that were to accompany and confirm the Word included healing and exorcism. The writer to the Hebrews says of the Gospel message that ‘God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various gifts of the Spirit distributed according to his will’<sup>23</sup> and describes his readers as those ‘who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age’.<sup>24</sup>

Church history continues after the Acts of the Apostles—we should not expect or look for a sharp break at the end of the Apostolic Age. I cannot accept the view propounded by Conyers Middleton in 1748 that miracles abruptly ceased at that point, though his arguments were later taken up by B.B. Warfield.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, my missionary experience with second- and third-generation Christians lends considerable weight to Campbell Moody’s suggestion that many of the Apostles’ converts failed to understand the full implications of the Gospel message, and pass these on to the next generation. Here is what Moody says:

The great line of cleavage is to be found between the earliest preachers and their immediate followers, not between the ‘enthusiastic’ church of the first generation or two and the church of succeeding ages.<sup>26</sup>

The general impression we receive during the Patristic period is of a decrease in the frequency of miracles, but not of their disappearance. In some writers there is a tendency to devalue their importance. Justin Martyr, for instance, speaks to Trypho thus about the Gifts of the Spirit:

For one receives the spirit of understanding, another of counsel, another of strength, another of foreknowledge, and another of the fear of God.<sup>27</sup>

Origen goes further:

Paul, in the list of spiritual gifts given by God, puts first the gift of wisdom, and second, as inferior to that, the word of knowledge, and third, even lower, I think, faith. And as he values reason above miraculous workings, on this account he puts ‘workings of miracles’ and ‘gifts of healing’ in a lower place than the intellectual gifts.<sup>28</sup>

Origen speaks of a falling-off:

Signs of the Holy Spirit were manifested at the beginning when Jesus was teaching, and after his ascension there were many more, though later they became less numerous. Nevertheless, even to this day there are traces of him in a few people whose souls have been purified by the Word and by the actions that follow his teaching.<sup>29</sup>

Two centuries later Augustine wrote:

These miracles were not allowed to last until our times lest the soul ever seek visible things and the human race grow cold because of familiarity with those things whose novelty enkindled it.<sup>30</sup>

This tendency of Patristic writers to devalue miracles makes their testimony to those which occurred all the more convincing and credible. Justin addresses the Roman rulers:

You may learn from what goes on under your own eyes. For many devil-possessed all over the world, and in your own city, many of our men, the Christians, have exorcised in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. When all other exorcists and sayers of charms and sellers of drugs failed, they have healed them, and still do heal, sapping the power of the demons who hold men, and driving them out.<sup>31</sup>

In the course of exorcism, a simple creed was recited. Justin to Trypho:

In the name of this same Son of God, firstborn of every creature, who was born of a virgin, and became man subject to suffering, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, . . . and died, and rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven, every demon exorcised is conquered and subdued.<sup>32</sup>

Tertullian looks on exorcism as a proof that Christ is victorious over the Roman gods, whom he equates with demons:

Mock as you like, but get the demons, if you can, to join in your mocking—let *them* deny that Christ is coming to judge! . . . Why, all the authority and power we have over them comes from our naming the Name of Christ . . . At our touch and breathing . . . they leave at our command the bodies they have entered—unwilling, distressed, and put to an open shame before your eyes.<sup>33</sup>

Irenaeus speaks of exorcisms, and more:

Some do, really and truly, cast out demons, so that the very ones who have been cleansed from evil spirits often believe, and are in the Church . . . What is more, as I said, even the dead have been raised and remained with us for considerable years . . . Nor does the Church

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do anything by angelic invocations, nor incantations, nor other perverse meddling. It directs prayers in a manner clear, pure, and open, to the Lord who made all things, and calls upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup>

When Celsus suggests that any name is as good as another for God, Origen gives this answer:

The name of Jesus still takes away mental distractions from men, and daemons and diseases as well, and implants a wonderful meekness and tranquillity of character, and a love to mankind and a kindness and a goodness to those . . . who have genuinely accepted the Gospel about God and Christ and the judgment to come.<sup>35</sup>

He writes as an eyewitness of healing and exorcism:

Some there are who show signs of having received through this Faith something the more incredible. I mean by the cures which they perform, calling upon nought else, over those who need their healing, than the God who is over all and the name of Jesus, along with the account concerning him.<sup>36</sup> For by these means we ourselves have seen many set free from grievous symptoms . . . without manipulations and magic and the use of drugs, but just by prayer and an invocation of the simpler kind, and such means as the simpler kind of man might be able to use. For it is mostly people quite untrained who do this work.<sup>37</sup>

Origen contrasts Christian healing with the work of pagan healers and exorcists by pointing to its moral results:

No sorcerer uses his tricks to call spectators to moral reformation; nor does he educate by the fear of God people who were astounded by what they saw, nor does he attempt to persuade the onlookers to live as men who will be judged by God.<sup>38</sup>

One of Origen's own converts had the gift of healing to a marked extent, and used it in the course of his evangelism in Pontus. About Gregory the 'Wonder Worker' we have this account:

At daybreak the crowd would be at the doors, men, women, and children, those suffering from demon-possession, or other afflictions or illnesses of the body. And he in the midst would, in the power of the spirit, apportion as befitted the need of each of those who had come together. He would preach, he would join an enquiry, he would advise, he would teach, he would heal . . . It was through both sight and hearing that the tokens of the Divine power shone forth upon him. For his discourses would astonish their hearing, and his wonders among the sick their sight.<sup>39</sup>

Even Augustine admits that he has seen or heard of some miracles:

When I wrote that book, I myself had recently learned that a blind man had been restored to sight at Milan near the bodies of the Martyrs in

that very city, and I knew about some others, so numerous even in these times, that we cannot know all of them nor enumerate those we know.<sup>40</sup>

This statement, however, introduces us to what was to become an obsession in the Church—the attribution of miracle-working powers to the relics of Apostles and Martyrs, and to places of pilgrimage. The practice is first hinted at in the story of Polycarp's martyrdom in the mid second century. While Peter's shadow, Paul's handkerchiefs, and Elisha's bones provide precedents of sorts,<sup>41</sup> the obsession shows a serious misunderstanding of the Gospel. It comes perilously near the border between faith and superstition and magic, and opens a door for the bogus and the fraud which was ruthlessly exploited in the Middle Ages.

I have not come across any record during this period of miraculous deliverance from martyrdom. The amusing story of the rescue of Dionysius of Alexandria by a wedding-party during the Decian persecution was a matter of providential timing, but did not involve the supernatural. What was miraculous was the almost super-human fortitude that the martyrs showed in the face of torture. Eyewitnesses write this about Blandina, the slave-girl of Lyons:

Blandina was filled with such power that those who took it in turns to subject her to every kind of torture from morning to night were exhausted by their efforts and confessed themselves beaten—they could think of nothing else to do to her . . . But the blessed woman, wrestling magnificently, grew in strength as she proclaimed the faith, and found refreshment, rest, and insensibility to her sufferings in uttering the words: 'I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of.'<sup>42</sup>

As regards other miraculous events, there is the story of the 'thundering legion'—rain sent in answer to Christian prayers—<sup>43</sup> but this may be looked on as an answer to prayer rather than a miracle proper. I find it difficult to believe the story of the Cross in the sky which Constantine the Great said he saw before the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 (although Constantine swore to Eusebius that it was true). It seems very much the afterthought of an old man looking back on the past, and reading into it what he wanted to find.<sup>44</sup> Eusebius says nothing about it in his *History*, but only in the *Life of Constantine*, written after the Emperor's death.

### **Miracles East of the Roman Empire**

The history of the spread of Christianity east of the Roman Empire provides no general statements like those of the Fathers to guide us. On the whole, those historians and chroniclers who seem careful and trustworthy say little about miracles, and therefore when they do mention miracles, they merit attention.



The first Bishop of Arbil, in Mesopotamia, is said to have been converted in 99 A.D. when he saw the Syrian evangelist Addai raise a man from the dead. Mashiha-Zakha mentions this quite casually, basing his account on a written second century source.<sup>45</sup> He also tells the story of a healing performed by Shahlufa, a later Bishop of Arbil, about 270.

Shahlufa grew more and more aflame with the ardour of God's love; it was he who baptised the inhabitants of the village of Tell-Niaha into the religion of the Blessed Trinity. He did this by a miracle, by means of which the Saviour was pleased to demonstrate that his servant was speaking the truth.

One of the headmen of the village, called Nakkiha, was seriously ill with dysentery. As his illness only went on increasing daily, and no one in his village was found who was able to cure him, his parents took him to the city of Arbil . . . Shahlufa went to visit him, at a time when all the relatives who had come with him were assembled. He promised them that he would heal him completely of the disease, if they did all he asked of them; and he began to expound the Christian faith, proving it from the Divine Books . . .

He showed them that Jesus, crucified by the Jews in Jerusalem, is God, Son of God, and that he suffered only of his own free choice, and in order to deliver us from slavery to demons. All agreed with what he said, and promised him that if he proved the truth of his words by healing Nakkiha, they would believe . . .

St. Shahlufa began to pray, and healed this incurable disease by the sign of the cross—for everything is easy for God. A great number of the inhabitants of the village believed the word of God and received baptism.<sup>46</sup>

The Church in Persia and Mesopotamia suffered long and savage persecution from the Sassanid Emperor Shapur II. The persecution lasted from 339 to 379, and a list of 16,000 names of known martyrs was later compiled. After the first fierce outbreak, some time before 344, a Jew taunted the Christian scholar Afrahat thus:

Jesus, who is called your Teacher, wrote for you that 'if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Be removed and be cast into the sea: it shall be done.'<sup>47</sup> Apparently, therefore, there is not one wise man in all your people whose prayer is heard, and who asks of God that your persecutors shall cease from troubling you. For clearly it is written for you in that passage: 'Nothing shall be impossible unto you.'<sup>48</sup>

In reply Afrahat spoke of many Old Testament prophets who had suffered for their faith, and went on:

Great and excellent is the martyrdom of Jesus. He surpassed in affliction and confession all who were before or after. And after Jesus,

Apostles in turn had been martyrs. And also concerning our brothers who are in the West, in the days of Diocletian there came great affliction and persecution to the whole Church of God . . .

In our days these things have happened to us on account of our sins, but also in order that what is written might be fulfilled, even as our Redeemer said, 'All these things must come to pass.'<sup>49</sup> The Apostle also said: 'We also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses.'<sup>50</sup> This is our honour, in which many confess, and are slain.<sup>51</sup>

The *Life of Mar Aba*, written before 579 A.D., gives an account of the life and sufferings of the greatest of the Patriarchs of the East, who held office from 539 to 552. Only one miraculous event, if we choose so to interpret it, is recorded—in connexion with his conversion. He was a land valuation officer, and one day, during the spring floods, came down to a ferry to cross the Tigris and visit his home. Yusuf, a Christian in the dress of a mendicant, was already sitting in the boat. The officer turned him out, and ordered the ferryman to cross over. A storm arose, and the ferry was beaten back by the wind. The *Life of Mar Aba* says this happened three times, but another account says twice. Finally the officer allowed Yusuf to travel across with him, and the wind fell completely. Arrived at the other bank, the officer showed his real greatness by asking Yusuf's forgiveness. Yusuf replied that a disciple of Jesus was forbidden to harbour a grudge. The quiet witness of this answer led to further questions, attendance at church, and finally baptism.<sup>52</sup> I feel reasonably certain that the conversion of this outstanding man of God was brought about through the combination of a 'nature-miracle' and a quiet personal testimony.

Thomas of Marga, in his *Book of Governors* (about 840), tells the stories of four outstanding missionaries among the Turks and Chinese during the patriarchate of Timothy I (780–823). In the case of three of them, no miracles are recorded, and Thomas says clearly he had heard of none. The fourth was Elijah, who evangelized Moqan, to the west of the Caspian Sea. He was a simple ascetic, a man of deep and practical devotional life and great faith in the power of prayer. He had his own method of concentration:

Mar Abraham told me that . . . every time he repeated aloud the verse of a Psalm, Elijah would say 'Hallelujah! Glory be to thee, O God' in such a way that his mind was compelled to think about the verse which was coming next . . . He cared less about the quantity of the Psalms which he sang than for the doubling of the riches and the concentration of the thoughts which were in his mind. It seemed a waste of time to him that others were saying the Psalter of David twice in a day and night, while minds were building up, and hiding, and judging, and condemning, and buying, and selling.<sup>53</sup>

Called by Timothy to do pioneer missionary work, Elijah insisted on being consecrated in his own monastery on the day of Pentecost. When he arrived at Moqan he went round the streets of the city calling on the people to turn from the worship of tree-demons to God the Lord of all. At first people mocked and laughed at him. It was when a plague with ulcers and tumours broke out that he was able to get a response. He offered to heal the people if they would promise to give up their idolatry and turn to God.

And he blessed the oil taken from the phial which he had upon him, and by prayer, and the sign of the Cross, and the making mention of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, he healed them all.<sup>54</sup>

He also cast out evil spirits, and preached the Gospel. They were convinced and converted, but there was still a barrier:

We have Yazd, whom our grandfathers, and ourselves, have worshipped, and we are afraid of the injuries he might do us. If, however, your God, in whom you made us place our trust . . . is able to slay and destroy Yazd, then . . . you can do what you like with us.<sup>55</sup>

Elijah, however, asked for no miracle. 'Where is this Yazd, the son of a b—?' he asked sharply. They took him to a hilltop and showed him a mighty oak tree, situated in a valley. He called for an axe, rolled up his sleeves and girded up his loins, and went down alone to fell the tree. In an incident remarkably parallel to what Boniface had done in Germany a century earlier, Elijah severed the main trunk, and then called the watching people to come and make a bonfire of the wood.

Now the people were ready for baptism. They built a church; their lives were changed; Elijah baptized many, and ordained priests and deacons. Later, on a visit to Mesopotamia, he was called to help a Muslim woman who was in the power of an evil spirit. He laid his Book of the Gospels on the breast of the afflicted woman, and commanded the devil to come out and depart to Harran in the west. The devil shouted in Arabic 'Ho, let us go to Harran!' many times, getting farther and farther away. The woman was completely cured, and confessed, 'There is no true belief except among the holy Christian people'.<sup>56</sup>

The East was also infected with the desire for relics, and round about 370 Ephraim the Syrian wrote a hymn about relics of St. Thomas said to have been brought by a merchant from India. Its refrain runs:

Blessed is the might that dwells in the hallowed bones!<sup>57</sup>

There is an amusing story told by Thomas of Marga about the sojourn of a Bishop of Nineveh in Antioch, on his way back from an embassy to Constantinople.

While they were resting in one of the churches of this city Mar Ishu'-Yab saw a white marble casket . . . and he saw the mighty deeds that were wrought there by means of it, and he learned that there were inside it some of the bones, and portions of the bodies of the blessed Apostles, and being hot with the desire of his love for the casket in which these were laid, he offered up prayers . . . that by his means it might be brought to this country. Not knowing what to do, he entrusted the matter to God, asking that, while he used all human efforts, Christ would protect and defend him in a Divine manner. This actually happened, for he stole it and brought it with him here with all the honour due to the holy pearls it contained.<sup>58</sup>

But I should like to conclude this brief account of the Church of the East on a more positive note. In June 1977 I had the privilege of visiting a little Assyrian Christian village in the hills north of Rezaiyeh, in north-western Iran near the Turkish border. The village bore the name of Kalisa (Church), and in the centre of it was a plain rectangular building said to date from 550 A.D. It had a flat roof, surmounted by three crosses, with a Persian flag flying from it. We entered the very low door and found ourselves in the nave of a small church, which had been recently furnished with benches. The sanctuary was higher up, behind a curtain, and north of it was a second small chapel. North of the nave was a third, carpeted chapel which we were told was for private devotions, and beside it, opening on the outside, a room where the sick were brought for healing. It was a moving thought that for fourteen hundred years village Christians had worshipped there, and brought their sick for healing.

### **Miracles in the West—Bede**

For some account of miracles in the West after the fall of the Roman Empire we can turn to the Venerable Bede (c. 673–735) whose *History of the English Church and People* covers the period up to 731, and contains many stories of miracles. In the Preface to his translation Sherley-Price has a valuable discussion of the miraculous element. He points out that Bede based his *History* on both written sources and verbal statements of people he considered reliable.

When we examine the miracles themselves, we find that some may be discounted as plagiarisms of Gospel miracles . . . Others are clearly pious forgeries . . . Others may spring from perfervid imagination or from coincidence. Others, again, may be due to causes that would not be regarded as miraculous today. But even when ruthless pruning has greatly reduced their number, there remains an indissoluble core that cannot be explained by any known natural means, and attributable solely to the supernatural power of God . . . God is not bound or restricted in the means by which he manifests his power or answers *the prayer of faith* . . . It is an indication of the temper of the age in which we live that some who profess and call themselves Christians have so little faith in the reality of God's power and mercy that they regard

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an unmistakable answer to prayer as something unlooked for and extraordinary, almost indecent. It was otherwise among the Christians of Bede's day.<sup>59</sup>

Of the miracles recorded over a dozen could be classified as 'nature-miracles'. Some are quite incredible, but several refer to wind-changes in answer to prayer—stormy sea calmed because the wind dropped, and incendiary attempts frustrated when the wind suddenly veered round.

There is one not very convincing story of exorcism.

The story of the raising of a dead man to life seems a pious fiction, with an 'improving' account of his recollections of purgatory, hell and heaven.

The rest—about a dozen and a half—are miracles of healing. Most of these are associated with sacred places, graveyards or relics. I am tempted to quote one, because it seems a vivid eyewitness account, and suggests what Charismatics would call 'resting in the Spirit'. At the place where good King Oswald had been killed in battle by the heathen, a sick horse was cured, and its owner rode on to an inn:

On his arrival he found a girl, the niece of the landlord, who had long suffered from paralysis; and when members of the household told him about the girl's disease, he began to describe to them the place where his horse had been cured. So they put the girl into a cart, took her to the place, and laid her down. Once there, she fell asleep and, on waking, she found herself restored to health. She asked for water, and washed her face; then she tidied her hair, adjusted her linen headgear, and returned home on foot in perfect health with those who had brought her.<sup>60</sup>

A few of the healings described were carried out personally by someone with a gift of healing. One such was John of Beverley, an older contemporary of Bede's. He cured a dumb boy, a thane's servant at the point of death, and a nun whose arm had swollen up after an inexpert 'bleeding'. Here is part of the account of the nun's healing, given to Bede by an eyewitness:

He went in, taking me with him to see the girl who . . . lay helpless and in great pain, with her arm swollen to such a size that she could not bend her elbow. The bishop stood and said a prayer over her, and having given her his blessing, went out. Some while later, as we were sitting at table, someone came in and asked me to come outside, saying 'Coenberg'—for that was the girl's name—'wishes you to come back to her room at once.' I did so, and when I entered, I found her looking cheerful, and apparently in sound health. And when I sat down by her she said: 'Would you like me to ask for a drink?' 'Certainly,' I replied, 'I shall be delighted if you will.' When a cup had been brought and we both had drunk, she began to tell me what had happened. 'As soon as

the bishop had blessed me and gone away. I began to feel better; and although I have not yet recovered my full strength, the pain has entirely left my arm where it was most intense, and from all my body . . . although the swelling in my arm seems to remain.' When we left the convent, the disappearance of the pain in her limbs was followed by a subsidence of the swelling, and the girl, saved from pain and death, gave thanks to our Lord and Saviour.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the strongest evidence that missionary work was sometimes, though not always, accompanied by miracles, lies in a letter dated 601 from Pope Gregory the Great to Augustine of Canterbury, which Bede copied into his *History*, especially as the Pope himself tends to devalue the miraculous:

My very dear brother, I hear that Almighty God has done great things through you . . . Let your joy be tempered with awe at God's heavenly gifts, and thank him that the souls of the English are being drawn to inward grace through outward miracles. At the same time, beware lest the frail mind becomes proud because of these wonderful events . . . For God's chosen do not all work miracles.<sup>62</sup>

### **Some Later Instances of Miracles**

Here are a few instances of miracles (or the lack of them) in the Middle Ages, and since the Reformation.

*Healing and raising the dead.* Mediaeval Western Christendom abandoned the practice of anointing the sick with oil for their recovery,<sup>63</sup> and instead used the 'sacrament' of Extreme Unction for the *dying*. Healing was attributed to saints, or to relics and places of pilgrimage associated with them. As Francis MacNutt puts it:

Traditionally, Catholics have always believed in miracles. But these cures took place not for the sick primarily, but as signs of a further truth. For instance, if healing came about through the prayers or the touch of a particular individual, it was a sign that he (or she) was extraordinarily holy. If a number of cures took place, they might be a sign that the person was a candidate for canonisation as a saint.<sup>64</sup>

This led to a great deal of hagiography, in which various miracles, credible or improbable, were attributed to saints. A Catholic friend enters this  *caveat*:

My own opinion is that these stories are not plain fact (though they could have been, of course) but instructional: holy men raise the dead, he was a holy man, *ergo* he raised the dead—and details are added to give the story some body.<sup>65</sup>

The gift of healing was attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, and many other mediaeval saints. Outside the Catholic Church, spiritual healing was practised among the Waldensians and the followers of

Huss. In the sixteenth century, healings were attributed to Luther and other Reformers, in the seventeenth to English Baptists and Quakers, in the eighteenth to John Wesley, and to many others since.<sup>66</sup>

I have heard of two instances of the dead being raised. St. Francis Xavier is said to have done this at Cape Comorin in India about 1545, but as early as 1584 a Jesuit in Goa reported that his enquiry 'revealed no certainty on the subject' and that 'no one could be found who had seen the miracle'.<sup>67</sup> John Welch, the son-in-law of John Knox, is said to have through his prayers raised to life a young nobleman who had been dead more than forty-eight hours. This took place in France about 1610, and the nobleman later settled in Ireland and became a man of some substance.<sup>68</sup>

*Exorcism.* In the Middle Ages exorcism was incorporated into Infant Baptism. The priest breathed three times on the child, and said: 'Depart from him, unclean spirit, and give place to the Holy Spirit.'<sup>69</sup> Witchcraft and occult influence were greatly feared, and those accused of witchcraft were frequently burned, a famous example being Joan of Arc. Protestants continued these burnings into the eighteenth century. The 'Enlightenment' led to the abandoning of the practice—belief in the occult was treated as an outworn superstition.

*Other signs and wonders.* In this connexion, one thinks of William of Rubruck, a sincere and persistent missionary, who wrote an account of his embassy to the Great Khan in 1253–55. He clearly expected no miracle, and records with regret that there was no mighty work which might have impressed the Turks and Tatars among whom he travelled. We think, again, of Savonarola's heart-searchings in 1498 when a trial by ordeal of fire was proposed by his Franciscan opponent—would it be tempting God to look for a miracle? (A heavy downpour prevented the trial from being carried out.) Different was Alexander Peden, the Covenanter, who, when the troopers sought him out, would pray: 'Cast the lap of thy cloak, Lord, over pair auld Sandy', and many a time was shrouded in mist. He listed twenty-four providential escapes, but when his time came to suffer, he was arrested and imprisoned for four and a half years.<sup>70</sup>

### **Miracles Worldwide—Modern Times**

One might have expected a fresh manifestation of signs and wonders in connexion with pioneer missionary work in the nineteenth century, but though there were undoubtedly instances of prayers for healing being answered, to the discomfiture of witch doctors and the like, on the whole the renewal of the miraculous came later. In China, Christians like Pator Hsi<sup>71</sup> (converted 1879, died 1896), and John Soong<sup>72</sup> (1901–1944), exercised remarkable gifts of healing—Soong carried his ministry of healing to other lands, including Indonesia. Since their days the flowering of the miraculous in many of the

younger churches has largely been contemporary with the spread of the Charismatic Movement in the West.

*Healing.* Mention should be made of the pioneering work done in Scotland in the '40s and '50s by Cameron Peddie. Peddie believed that every ordained minister had potentially the gift of healing, but he emphasized the importance of 'watching with God' for at least an hour every day.<sup>73</sup>

I have read of miraculous healings taking place in such diverse places as Korea, Kampuchea, Hong Kong, Soviet Russia, Nigeria, South Africa, and South America. The story of the revival in Indonesia,<sup>74</sup> a land where the occult is rampant, is full of well-attested cases of healing. I was myself present in 1961 in Sialkot, Pakistan, when a fellow-missionary, Malcolm Duncan, was restored to health from the point of death, and given five more years of fruitful service.

*Raising the dead.* Stories of this are rarer. 'Present-day missionaries,' writes a Catholic, 'have told me of instances, but the point was God's goodness to the person raised, not the sanctity of the "middle man".'<sup>75</sup> Demos Shakarian speaks of a man 'certified as dead by a doctor in South Africa, raised to life when a group from the Fellowship prayed, today triumphantly carrying his death certificate in his breast pocket'.<sup>76</sup> At Afenmai, in Nigeria, there were many cases of healing in 1966–67, including at least six instances of the dead being raised. In that time of revival healing was expected in faith, and when in one case a girl prayed for was not healed, the African Christians were sorely puzzled.<sup>77</sup>

Kurt Koch reports on the work of a 25-year old Indonesian evangelist named Anna. He tells of her zeal for the destruction of idols, her gift of prophecy, and healings of blind, deaf and lame. He goes on:

On other occasions, she has even prayed for those who have died, although only if the Lord commanded her to do so . . . Once she was led to a two-year-old child who had died. After she had prayed for him, he was raised up.<sup>78</sup>

Gulshan, daughter of a wealthy Pakistani Muslim family, suffered from paralysis, and was taken by her father to Mecca for healing, but in vain. In the early 1970s she had a vision of Christ, and experienced direct healing without a human intermediary. Later she was led to make contact with Christians, and was baptized, taking the name of Gulshan Ester. A year or so later she was called urgently to the side of her sister Anis, but when she arrived at the family home, it was to find that Anis had died in childbirth, and that the remains had been washed and laid out on a bed. The account goes on:

I prayed, 'Lord, you put some life in her so that I can talk to her for a while about Jesus.' Then at length I heard a voice, 'She is not dead.



She is alive. I have added to her life.' . . . Suddenly my sister moved her arm, opened her eyes, sat bolt upright and looked around her in wonder.<sup>79</sup>

Shortly afterwards, Anis believed in Christ, and her sister baptized her. Later on she died.

Smith Wigglesworth, the Pentecostalist plumber with the gift of healing, tells the story of a woman who was raised to life, some time in the 1920s:

I said to my friend, 'We will pray with her and anoint her.' After we had anointed her, her chin dropped. My friend said, 'She is dead.' I looked into her face and said, 'In the name of Jesus I rebuke this death.' From the crown of her head to the sole of her feet her whole body began to tremble. 'In the name of Jesus, I command you to walk,' I said. I repeated, 'In the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus, walk!' and she walked.<sup>80</sup>

*Exorcism.* Exorcism is commonly practised in the younger churches, though I know from experience that there can be an obsession with the demonic, and a failure to discriminate between devil-oppression and mental or even physical sickness. A girl I knew who had severe manic-depressive symptoms, found a service of exorcism less helpful than electric shock treatment in a mental hospital. Dr. John Bavington writes:

While not wishing to deny the possibility of spirit possession, from my experience in Pakistan I can hardly think of a single case of alleged possession which could not, at the same time, be recognised as epilepsy, hysteria, schizophrenia or, more rarely, some other diagnostic category.<sup>81</sup>

At the same time, in a land where there is a strong belief in the occult, especially in the wearing of charms and visits to the tombs of holy men, demonic influence cannot be ruled out. A lad, challenged by a Pakistani exorcist as to his identity, replied in the plural: 'We are the spirits of the good people who dwell at the holy man's tomb.' I knew personally an Australian Anglican missionary, the Revd. Sid Iggulden, who was greatly used in the 1970s in a ministry of deliverance among Muslims. But 'the ability to distinguish between spirits'<sup>82</sup> is essential.

*Signs and wonders.* A few years ago a visitor to China told how during the Cultural Revolution Christians holding a service on a hillside were made invisible to their persecutors.<sup>83</sup> One has to set this story against the one Doreen Irvine recounts of how she and other witches used occult influences to make themselves invisible to Christians searching for them.<sup>84</sup>

The Indonesian Revival saw many instances of the miraculous—

provision of food for 50 people, turning of water into wine for Communion, and so on.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, though it involves speaking, I should like to share the story which was told to me by a Pakistani pastor in the 1960s. He was having a meal in a restaurant, and discussing the Atonement with a fellow-Christian. At a nearby table two Chinese visitors were having a meal with their Pakistani Muslim host. In broken English they asked the pastor—‘How you know our language?’ and testified that while he had been *speaking* about Jesus in Punjabi, they had been *hearing* in Chinese!

## Conclusion

Our knowledge of the incidence of miracles in the course of Church History is very partial, and a study like this is bound to be selective rather than comprehensive. It is not easy to draw firm conclusions, but I would venture the following:

1. Miracles, signs and wonders became less frequent after the Apostolic Age, but were never wholly withdrawn from the experience of the Church. In spite of misunderstandings of the full import of the Gospel, and distortions of its truth, God again and again acted miraculously in grace in response to expectant faith.

2. In our day and generation there has been a remarkable renewal of miracles. It is arguable that this has accompanied a greater expectancy of faith, and a clearer understanding of the part signs and wonders play in the Gospel of the Kingdom.

3. Miracles have often, though not invariably, been manifested in missionary situations, as acts and signs of the power and compassion of the living God. In areas like Indonesia where there has been revival, miracles have multiplied.

My son John spent more than two years in a Hindu tribal village in Pakistan, as a student of social anthropology. He himself saw miracles of healing taking place in answer to the prayers of tribal Christians, and gives this estimate of their significance:

In 1981 Christianity was only one of the many alternative paths to salvation seen to be available to the tribal Hindus of Sind, and Jesus was only one of many spiritual leaders who had their followings. How, then, was Jesus to be shown to be different? . . .

To be shown Jesus, the people of Sind had to be shown that Jesus was and is real. This could only be done effectively by Christians relying on Him totally, and not just on Christian scripture, Christian doctrine, Western power, or Mission money. It was only when some Christians in Sind risked their own faith by asking Jesus to reveal Himself through miraculous works that those they wished to reach came to know Him. And, having seen His Power and put their trust in Him, they began to ask about Christianity, and about the Bible, and of the way of love.<sup>86</sup>

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## NOTES

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