

# JAMES MORRIS WHITON

MIRACLES AND  
SUPERNATURAL RELIGION

James Morris Whiton

# **Miracles and Supernatural Religion**

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*Portentum non fit contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura*  
—*Augustine*

## PREFATORY NOTE

While the present subject of discussion tempts to many an excursion into particulars, its treatment is restricted to general outlines, with an aim simply to clarify current ideas of miracle and the supernatural, so as to find firm holding ground for tenable positions in the present "drift period" of theology. The chief exception made to this general treatment is the discussion given to a class of miracles regarded with as much incredulity as any, yet as capable as any of being accredited as probably historical events—the raisings of the "dead." The insistence of some writers on the virgin birth and corporeal resurrection of Jesus as essential to Christianity has required brief discussion of these also, mainly with reference to the reasonableness of that demand. As to the latter miracle, it must be observed that in the Biblical narratives taken as a whole, whichever of their discordant features one be disposed to emphasize, the psychical element clearly preponderates over the physical and material.

*J. M. W.*

New York,  
April 11, 1903.

## INTRODUCTORY

IN a historical retrospect greater and more revolutionary changes are seen to have occurred during the nineteenth century than in any century preceding. In these changes no department of thought and activity has failed to share, and theological thought has been quite as much affected as scientific or ethical. Especially remarkable is the changed front of Christian theologians toward miracles, their distinctly lowered estimate of the significance of miracle, their antipodal reverse of the long established treatment of miracles. Referring to this a British evangelical writer<sup>1</sup> observes that "the intelligent believer of our own day, ... instead of accepting Christianity on the ground of the miracles, accepts it in spite of the miracles. Whether he admits these miracles, or rejects them, his attitude toward them is toward difficulties, not helps."

By this diametrical change of Christian thought a great amount of scepticism has already been antiquated. A once famous anti-Christian book, *Supernatural Religion*, regarded as formidable thirty years ago, is now as much out of date for relevancy to present theological conditions as is the old smooth-bore cannon for naval warfare. That many, indeed, are still unaware of the change that has been experienced by the leaders of Christian thought, no one acquainted with current discussions will deny; the fact is indubitable. It is reviewed in the following pages with the constructive purpose of redeeming the idea of supernatural Religion from pernicious perversion, and of exhibiting it in its true spiritual significance. The once highly reputed calculations made to show how the earth's diurnal revolution could be imperceptibly stopped for Joshua's convenience, and the contention that the Mediterranean produced fish with gullets capable of giving passage to Jonah, are now as dead as the chemical controversy about phlogiston. Yet some sceptical controversialists are still so far from cultivating the acquaintance with recent thought which they recommend to Christian theologians, as to persist in affirmations of amazing ignorance, *e.g.* "It is admitted that miracles alone can attest the reality of divine revelation."<sup>2</sup> Sponsors for this statement must now be sought among unlearned Christians, or among a few scholars who survive as cultivators of the old-fashioned argument from the "evidences." Even among these latter the tendency to minimize miracle is undeniably apparent in a reduction of the list classified as such, and still more in the brevity of the list insisted on for the attestation of Christianity.

A transitional state of mind is clearly evidenced by the present division and perplexity of Christian thought concerning the Christian miracles. Many seem to regard further discussion as profitless, and are ready to shelve the subject. But this attitude of weariness is also transitional. There must be some thoroughfare to firm ground and clear vision. It must be found in agreement, first of all, on the real meaning of a term so variously and vaguely used as *miracle*. In the present imperfect state of knowledge it may be impossible to enucleate miracle, however defined, of all mystery. But even so will much be gained for clear thinking, if miracle can be reasonably related to the greater mystery which all accept, though none understand,—the mystery of *life*. This view of the dynamic relation of life to miracle<sup>3</sup> is here suggested for what it may prove to be worth.

The great and general change that transfigured theology during the nineteenth century was characteristically ethical. This, indeed, is the distinctive feature of the so-called new theology, in contrast with that which the Protestant Reformers inherited from St. Augustine. God and Man, Faith, Salvation and Inspiration, Redemption and Atonement, Judgment and Retribution,—all these themes are now presented in orthodox pulpits far more conformably to ethical principles, though in degrees

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<sup>1</sup> Professor W. T. Adeney in the *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1903, p. 302.

<sup>2</sup> See the recent new edition of *Supernatural Religion*, "carefully revised."

<sup>3</sup> For an earlier statement of this by the present writer, see a discourse on "Miracle and Life," in *New Points to Old Texts*. London: James Clarke & Co., 1889. New York: Thomas Whittaker.

varying with educated intelligence, than was customary in the sermons of half a century ago. "One great source and spring of theological progress," says Professor Bowne, in his recent work on *Theism*, "has been the need of finding a conception of God which the moral nature could accept. The necessity of moralizing theology has produced vast changes in that field; and the end is not yet."

The ethical character of the theological change will perhaps be most obvious in the field of Biblical study, to which the present subject belongs. The traditional solution of such moral difficulties in the Old Testament as commands, ostensibly divine, to massacre idolaters has been quite discarded. It is no longer the mode to say that deeds seemingly atrocious were not atrocious, because God commanded them. Writers of orthodox repute now say that the *Thus saith the Lord*, with which Samuel prefaced his order to exterminate the Amalekites, must be understood subjectively, as an expression of the prophet's belief, not objectively, as a divine command communicated to him. This great change is a quite recent change. If a personal reference may be indulged, it is not twenty years since the present writer's published protest against "The Anti-Christian Use of the Bible in the Sunday School,"<sup>4</sup> the exhibition to children of some vestiges of heathen superstition embedded in the Old Testament narratives as true illustrations of God's ways toward men, drew forth from a religious journal a bitter editorial on "The Old Testament and its New Enemies." But a great light has since dawned in that quarter. It is no longer deemed subversive of faith in a divine Revelation to hold that the prophet Gad was not infallible in regarding the plague which scourged Jerusalem as sent to punish David's pride in his census of the nation.

A significant fact is presented in the comparison of these two aspects of the theological change that has come to pass,—the growing importance of the ethical, and the dwindling importance of the miraculous in the religious thought of to-day. This may reassure those who fear whereto such change may grow. The inner significance of such a change is most auspicious. It portends the displacement of a false by the true conception of supernatural Religion, and the removal thereby of a serious antagonism between Science and Christian Theology, as well as of a serious hindrance of many thoughtful minds from an intelligent embrace of Christianity.

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Englander*, September, 1884.



## I

Synopsis.—The gradual narrowing of the miraculous element in the Bible by recent discovery and discussion.—The alarm thereby excited in the Church.—The fallacy which generates the fear.—The atheistic conception of nature which generates the fallacy.—The present outgrowing of this conception.

It is barely forty years since that beloved and fearless Christian scholar, Dean Stanley, spoke thus of the miracles recorded of the prophet Elisha: "His works stand alone in the Bible in their likeness to the acts of mediæval saints. There alone in the Sacred History the gulf between Biblical and Ecclesiastical miracles almost disappears."<sup>5</sup> It required some courage to say as much as this then, while the storm of persecution was raging against Bishop Colenso for his critical work on the Pentateuch. The evangelical clergymen in England and the United States then prepared to confess as much as this, with all that it obviously implies, could have been seated in a small room. But time has moved on, and the Church, at least the scholars of the Church, have moved with it. No scholar of more than narrowly local repute now hesitates to acknowledge the presence of a legendary element both in the Old Testament and in the New. While the extent of it is still undetermined, many specimens of it are recognized. It is agreed that the early narratives in Genesis are of this character, and that it is marked in such stories as those of Samson, Elijah, and Elisha. Even the conservative revisers of the Authorized Version have eliminated from the Fourth Gospel the story of the angel at the pool of Bethesda, and in their marginal notes on the Third Gospel have admitted a doubt concerning the historicity of the angel and the bloody sweat in Gethsemane.

Furthermore, some events, recognized as historical, have been divested of the miraculous character once attributed to them,—the crossing of the Red Sea, for instance, by the Hebrew host. A landslide in the thirteenth century a.d. has been noted as giving historical character to the story of the Hebrew host under Joshua's command crossing the Jordan "on dry ground," but in a perfectly natural way. Other classes of phenomena once regarded as miraculous have been transferred to the domain of natural processes by the investigations and discoveries that have been made in the field of psychical research. The forewarning which God is said to have given the prophet Ahijah of the visit that the queen was about to pay him in disguise<sup>6</sup> is now recognized as one of many cases of the mysterious natural function that we label as "telepathy." The transformations of unruly, vicious, and mentally disordered characters by hypnotic influence that have been effected at the Salpêtrière in Paris, and elsewhere, by physicians expert in psychical therapeutics are closely analogous to the cures wrought by Jesus on some victims of "demoniac possession."<sup>7</sup> The cases of apparition,<sup>8</sup> also, which have been investigated and verified by the Society for Psychical Research have laid a solid basis of fact for the Biblical stories of angels, as at least, a class of phenomena to be regarded as by no means altogether legendary, but having their place among natural though mysterious occurrences.

But this progressive paring down of the miraculous element in the Bible has caused outcries of unfeigned alarm. Christian scholars who have taken part in it are reproached as deserters to the

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<sup>5</sup> *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church*, Vol. II, p. 362, American edition.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings xiv. 1-7.

<sup>7</sup> It is not intended to intimate that there is no such darker reality as a "possession" that is "demoniac" indeed. It cannot be reasonably pronounced superstitious to judge that there is some probability for that view. At any rate, it is certain that the problem is not to be settled by dogmatic pronouncement. It is certain, also, that the burden of proof rests on those who contend that there can be no such thing. On the other hand, it may be conceded that the cases recorded in the New Testament do not seem to be of an essentially devilish kind. On the general subject of "possession" see F. W. H. Myers's work on *Human Personality and Survival after Death*, Vol. I. (Longmans, Green & Co., New York and London.) Professor William James half humorously remarks: "The time-honored phenomenon of diabolical possession is on the point of being admitted by the scientist as a fact, now that he has the name of hysterodemonopathy by which to apperceive it." *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 501, note.

<sup>8</sup> See *Dictionary of Psychology*, art. "Psychical Research."

camp of unbelief. They are accused of banishing God from his world, and of reducing the course of events to an order of agencies quite undivine. "Miracle," writes one of these brethren,<sup>9</sup> "is the personal intervention of God into the chain of cause and effect." But what does this mean, except that, when no miracles occur, God is not personally, *i.e.* actively, in the chain of natural causes and effects? As Professor Drummond says, "If God appears periodically, he disappears periodically." It is precisely this view of the subject that really banishes God from his world. Those who thus define miracle regard miracles as having ceased at the end of the Apostolic age in the first century. Except, therefore, for the narrow range of human history that the Bible covers in time and place, God has not been personally in the chain of natural causes and effects. Thus close to an atheistic conception of nature does zeal for traditional orthodoxy unwittingly but really come.

The first pages of the Bible correct this error. "While the earth remaineth," so God is represented as assuring Noah, "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease." The presence of God in his world was thus to be evinced by his regular sustentation of its natural order, rather than by irregular occurrences, such as the deluge, in seeming contravention of it. To seek the evidence of divine activity in human affairs and to ground one's faith in a controlling Providence in sporadic and cometary phenomena, rather than in the constant and cumulative signs of it to be seen in the majestic order of the starry skies, in the reign of intelligence throughout the cosmos, in the moral evolution of ancient savagery into modern philanthropy, in the historic manifestation throughout the centuries of a Power not our own that works for the increase of righteousness, is a mode of thought which in our time is being steadily and surely outgrown. It is one of those "idols of the tribe" whose power alike over civilized and uncivilized men is broken less by argument than by the ascent of man to wider horizons of knowledge.

It is for the gain of religion that it should be broken,—of the spiritual religion whose God is not a tradition, a reminiscence, but a living presence, inhabiting alike the clod and the star, the flower in the crannied wall and the life of man. So thinking of God the religious man may rightly say,<sup>10</sup> "If it is more difficult to believe in miracles, it is less important. If the extraordinary manifestations of God recounted in ancient history appear less credible, the ordinary manifestations of God in current life appear more real. He is seen in American history not less than in Hebrew history; in the life of to-day not less than in the life of long ago."

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Peloubet, *Teachers' Commentary on the Acts*, 1902.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Lyman Abbott in *The Outlook*, February 14, 1903.

## II

Synopsis.—The present net results of the discussion of the miraculous element in the Bible.—Evaporation of the former evidential value of miracles.—Further insistence on this value a logical blunder.—The transfer of miracles from the artillery to the baggage of the Church.—Probability of a further reduction of the list of miracles.—Also of a further transfer of events reputed miraculous to the domain of history.

THE cultivation of scientific and historical studies during the last century, especially in its latter half, has deepened the conviction that

"Through the ages one increasing purpose runs;"

has disposed a growing number of thoughtful minds to regard occasional signs and wonders, reported from ancient times, as far less evidential for the reasonableness of religious faith than the steady sustentation of the Providential order and the moral progress of the world. Fully convinced of this, we should now estimate, before proceeding further, the present net results of the discussion, so far as it has gone, of what is called the miraculous element in the Bible.

First, its former evidential value in proof of divine Revelation is gone for the men of to-day. The believer in a divine Revelation does not now, if he is wise, rest his case at all on the miracles connected with its original promulgation, as was the fashion not very long since. This for two reasons; chiefly this: that *the decisive criterion of any truth, ethical or physical, must be truth of the same kind*. Ethical truth must be ethically attested. The moral and religious character of the Revelation presents its credentials of worth in its history of the moral and religious renovations it has wrought both in individuals and in society. This is its proper and incontrovertible attestation, in need of no corroboration from whatever wonderful physical occurrences may have accompanied its first utterance. Words of God are attested as such by the work of God which they effect. It may well be believed that those wonderful occurrences—the Biblical name for which is "signs," or "powers," terms not carrying, like "miracles," the idea of something contra-natural<sup>11</sup>—had an evidential value for those to whom the Revelation originally came. In fact, they were appealed to by the bearers of the Revelation as evidencing its divine origin by the mighty works of divine mercy which they wrought for sufferers from the evils of the world. But whatever their evidential value to the eye-witnesses at that remote day, it was of the inevitably volatile kind that exhales away like a perfume with lapse of time. Historic doubts attack remote events, especially when of the extraordinary character which tempts the narrator to that magnifying of the marvellous which experience has found to be a constantly recurring human trait. It is simply impossible that the original evidential value of the "signs" accompanying the Revelation should continue permanently unimpaired. To employ them now as "evidences of Christianity," when the Revelation has won on ethical grounds recognition of its divine character and can summon history to bear witness of its divine effects in the moral uplift of the world, is to imperil the Christian argument by the preposterous logical blunder of attempting to prove the more certain by the less certain.

A second net result consequent on the preceding may be described as the transference of miracles from the ordnance department to the quartermaster's department of the Church. Until recently they were actively used as part of its armament, none of which could be dispensed with. Now they are carried as part of its baggage, *impedimenta*, from which everything superfluous must be removed. It is clearly seen that to retain all is to imperil the whole. That there are miracles and miracles is patent to minds that have learned to scan history more critically than when a scholar like John

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<sup>11</sup> The Anglicized Latin word, "miracle," indiscriminately used in the Authorized Version, denotes the superficial character of the act or event it is applied to, as producing wonder or amazement in the beholders. The terms commonly employed in the New Testament (*sēmeion*, a sign; *dunamis*, power; less frequently *teras*, a portent) are of deeper significance, and connote the inner nature of the occurrence, either as requiring to be pondered for its meaning, or as the product of a new and peculiar energy.

Milton began his *History of England* with the legend of the voyage of "Brute the Trojan." One may reasonably believe that Jesus healed a case of violent insanity at Gadara, and reasonably disbelieve that the fire of heaven was twice obedient to Elijah's call to consume the military companies sent to arrest him. Cultivated discernment does not now put all Biblical miracles on a common level of credibility, any more than the historical work of Herodotus and that of the late Dr. Gardiner. To defend them all is not to vindicate, but to discredit all alike. The elimination of the indefensible, the setting aside of the legendary, the transference of the supposedly miraculous to the order of natural powers and processes so far as vindicable ground for such critical treatment is discovered, is the only way to answer the first of all questions concerning the Bible: How much of this is credible history? Thus it is not only thoroughly reasonable, but is in the interest of a reasonable belief that divine agency is revealed rather by the upholding of the established order of Nature than by any alleged interference therewith. With what God has established God never interferes. To allege his interference with his established order is virtually to deny his constant immanence therein, a failure to recognize the fundamental fact that "Nature is Spirit," as Principal Fairbairn has said, and all its processes and powers the various modes of the energizing of the divine Will.

A third net result now highly probable is a still further reduction of the list of reputed miracles. The critical process of discriminating the historical from the legendary, and the natural from the non-natural, is still so comparatively recent that it can hardly be supposed to have reached its limit. Nor can it be stayed by any impeachment of it as hostile to Christianity, whose grand argument appeals to its present ethical effects, not to ancient thaumaturgical accompaniments. There is, however, a considerable class of cases in which the advancing critical process is likely even to gain credibility for the Biblical narrative in a point where it is now widely doubted—the resuscitations of the apparently dead. Among all the Biblical miracles none have more probably a secure historical basis.

### III

Synopsis.—Arbitrary criticism of the Biblical narratives of the raising of the "dead."—Facts which it ignores.—The subject related to the phenomena of trance, and records of premature burial.—The resuscitation in Elisha's tomb probably historical.—Jesus' raising of the ruler's daughter plainly a case of this kind.—His raising of the widow's son probably such.—The hypothesis that his raising of Lazarus may also have been such critically examined.—The record allows this supposition.—Further considerations favoring it: 1. The real interests of Christianity secure.—2. The miracle as a work of mercy.—3. Incompetency of the bystanders' opinion.—4. Congruity with the general conception of the healing works of Jesus, as wrought by a peculiar psychical power.—Other cases.—The resurrection of Jesus an event in a wholly different order of things.—The practical result of regarding these resuscitations as in the order of nature.

F resuscitation from apparent death seven cases in all are recorded,—three in the Old Testament and four in the New. Some critics arbitrarily reject all but one of these as legendary. Thus Oscar Holzmann, in his recent *Leben Jesu*, treats the raising of the widow's son, and of Lazarus. But he accepts the case of the ruler's daughter on the ground that Jesus is reported as saying that it was not a case of real but only of apparent death,—"the child is not dead, but sleepeth." But for the preservation of this saving declaration in the record, this case also would have been classed with the others as unhistorical. And yet the admission of one clear case of simulated death, so like real death as to deceive all the onlookers but Jesus, might reasonably check the critic with the suggestion that it may not have been a solitary case.<sup>12</sup> The headlong assumption involved in the discrimination made between these two classes, viz. that in a case of apparent but unreal death the primitive tradition can be depended on to put the fact upon record, is in the highest degree arbitrary and unwarrantable.

The scepticism which lightly contradicts the Biblical narratives of the raising of the "dead" to life is seemingly ignorant of facts that go far to place these upon firm ground as historical occurrences. Catalepsy, or the simulation of death by a trance, in which the body is sometimes cold and rigid, sensation gone, the heart still, is well known to medical men.<sup>13</sup> In early times such a condition would inevitably have been regarded and treated as actual death, without the least suspicion that it was not so. Even now, the dreadful mistake of so regarding it sometimes occurs. So cautious a journal as the London *Spectator* a few years ago expressed the belief that "a distinct percentage" of premature burials "occurs every year" in England.

The proper line of critical approach to the study of the Biblical narratives of the raising of the "dead" is through the well-known facts of the deathlike trance and premature burial.

Where burial occurred, as in the East, immediately after the apparent death,<sup>14</sup> resuscitation must have been rare. Yet cases of it were not unknown. Pliny has a chapter "on those who have revived on being carried forth for burial." Lord Bacon states that of this there have been "very many cases." A French writer of the eighteenth century, Bruhier, in his "*Dissertations sur l'Incertitude de la Mort et l'Abus des Enterrements*," records seventy-two cases of mistaken pronouncement of death, fifty-three of revival in the coffin before burial, and fifty-four of burial alive. A locally famous and

<sup>12</sup> An objection to the historicity of the raising of Lazarus which is made on the ground that so great a work, if historical, would have been related by more than one of the Evangelists, yields on reflection the possibility that Jesus may have effected more than the three raisings recorded of him. John is the sole narrator of the raising of Lazarus. But he omits notice of the two raisings recorded by the other Evangelists, while Matthew and Mark do not record the raising of the widow's son recorded by Luke. All this suggests that the record may have preserved for us specimens rather than a complete list of this class of miracles. (Compare John xxi. 25.)

<sup>13</sup> "We have frequent cases of trance, ... where the parties seem to die, but after a time the spirit returns, and life goes on as before. In all this there is no miracle. Why may not the resuscitations in Christ's time possibly have been similar cases? Is not this less improbable than that the natural order of the universe should have been set aside?"—*The Problem of Final Destiny*, by William B. Brown, D.D., 1899.

<sup>14</sup> On account of the ceremonial "uncleanness" caused by the dead body. See Numbers v. 2, and many similar passages.

thoroughly attested case in this country is that of the Rev. William Tennent, pastor in Freehold, New Jersey, in the eighteenth century, who lay apparently dead for three days, reviving from trance just as his delayed funeral was about to proceed. One who keeps a scrap-book could easily collect quite an assortment of such cases, and of such others as have a tragic ending, both from domestic and foreign journals. A work published some years ago by Dr. F. Hartmann<sup>15</sup> exhibits one hundred and eight cases as typical among over seven hundred that have been authenticated.<sup>16</sup>

Facts like these have been strangely overlooked in the hasty judgment prompted by prejudice against whatever has obtained credence as miraculous. Some significant considerations must be seriously entertained.

It cannot be that no such facts occurred in the long periods covered by the Biblical writers. Occurring, it is extremely improbable that they should have altogether escaped embodiment in popular tradition and its record. Furthermore, while on one hand the custom of speedy burial rendered them much rarer than they are now under other conditions, and so much the more extraordinary, the universal ignorance of the causes involved would have accepted resuscitation as veritable restoration from actual death. As such it would have passed into tradition. In cases where it had come to pass in connection with the efforts of a recognized prophet, or through any contact with him, it would certainly have been regarded as a genuine miracle.

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<sup>15</sup> *Buried Alive* (Universal Truth Publishing Co., Chicago). See also *Premature Burial*, by D. Walsh (William Wood & Co., New York), and *Premature Burial*, by W. Tebb and E. P. Volland (New Amsterdam Book Co., New York).

<sup>16</sup> Other writers might be mentioned, as Mme. Necker (1790), Dr. Vigné (1841). Yet on the other hand it is alleged, that "none of the numerous stories of this dreadful accident which have obtained credence from time to time seem to be authentic" (*American Cyclopaedia*, art. "Burial"). Allowing a wide margin for exaggeration and credulity, there is certainly a residuum of fact. A correspondent of the (London) *Spectator* a few years since testified to a distressing case in his own family.

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