

Miracles

I HAVE KNOWN ONLY ONE PERSON IN MY LIFE WHO CLAIMED to have seen a ghost. It was a woman; and the interesting thing is that she disbelieved in the immortality of the soul before seeing the ghost and still disbelieves after having seen it. She thinks it was a hallucination. In other words, seeing is not believing. This is the first thing to get clear in talking about miracles. Whatever experiences we may have, we shall not regard them as miraculous if we already hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural. Any event which is claimed as a miracle is, in the last resort, an experience received from the senses; and the senses are not infallible.

We can always say we have been the victims of an illusion; if we disbelieve in the supernatural this is what we always shall say. Hence, whether miracles have really ceased or not, they would certainly appear to cease in Western Europe as materialism became the popular creed. For let us make no mistake. If the end of the world appeared in all the literal trappings of the Apocalypse,ⁱ if the modern materialist saw with his own eyes the heavens rolled upⁱⁱ and the great white throne appearing,ⁱⁱⁱ if he had the sensation of being himself hurled into the Lake of Fire,^{iv} he would continue forever, in that lake itself, to regard his experience as an illusion and to find the explanation of it in psycho-analysis, or cerebral pathology. Experience by itself proves nothing. If a man doubts whether he is dreaming or waking, no experiment can solve his doubt, since every experiment may itself be part of the dream.

Experience proves this, or that, or nothing, according to the preconceptions we bring to it. This fact, that the interpretation of experiences depends on preconceptions, is often used as an argument against miracles. It is said that our ancestors, taking the supernatural for granted and greedy of wonders, read the miraculous into events that were really not miracles. And in a sense I grant it. That is to say, I think that just as our preconceptions would prevent us from apprehending miracles if they really occurred, so their preconceptions would lead them to imagine miracles even if they did not occur. In the same way, the dotting man will think his wife faithful when she is not and the suspicious man will not think her faithful when she is: the

question of her actual fidelity remains, meanwhile, to be settled, if at all, on other grounds.

But there is one thing often said about our ancestors which we must *not* say. We must not say 'They believed in miracles because they did not know the Laws of Nature.' This is nonsense. When St Joseph discovered that his bride was pregnant, he was 'minded to put her away'.^v He knew enough biology for that. Otherwise, of course he would not have regarded pregnancy as a proof of infidelity. When he accepted the Christian explanation, he regarded it as a miracle precisely because he knew enough of the Laws of Nature to know that this was a suspension of them. When the disciples saw Christ walking on the water they were frightened:^{vi} they would not have been frightened unless they had known the laws of Nature and known that this was an exception.

If a man had no conception of a regular order in Nature, then of course he could not notice departures from that order: just as a dunce who does not understand the normal metre of a poem is also unconscious of the poet's variations from it. Nothing is wonderful except the abnormal and nothing is abnormal until we have grasped the norm. Complete ignorance of the laws of Nature would preclude the perception of the miraculous just as rigidly as complete disbelief in the supernatural precludes it, perhaps even more so. For while the materialist would have at least to explain miracles away, the man wholly ignorant of Nature would simply not notice them.

The experience of a miracle in fact requires two conditions. First we must believe in a normal stability of nature, which means we must recognize that the data offered by our senses recur in regular patterns. Secondly, we must believe in some reality beyond Nature.

(God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics by C. S. Lewis, ed. Walter Hooper, Harper One, Kindle, 25-26 of 347, Paragraph Structure Modified; From Part I, Chapter 2, Miracles)

ⁱ The book of Revelation.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, vi. 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, xx. 11.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, xix. 20; xx. 10; xx. 14-15; xxi. 8.

^v Matthew i. 19.

^{vi} Matthew xiv. 26; Mark vi. 49; John vi. 19.