

CHAPTER XXVII

MIRACLES AND THE COSMIC ORDER

1. "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty?
Who is like unto Thee, glorious in holiness,
Fearful in praises, doing wonders!"¹

Thus sang Israel at the Red Sea in words which are constantly reëchoed in our liturgy. Nothing impresses the religious sense of man so much as unusual phenomena in nature, which seem to interrupt the wonted course of events and thus to reveal the workings of a higher Power. A miracle—that is, a thing "wondered" at, because not understood—is always regarded by Scripture as a "sign"² or "proof"³ of the power of God, to whom nothing is impossible. The child-like mind of the past knew nothing of fixed or immutable laws of nature. Therefore the question is put in all simplicity: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"⁴ "Is the Lord's hand waxed short?"⁵ "Or should He who created heaven and earth not be able to create something which never was before?"⁶ Should "He who maketh a man's mouth, or makes him deaf, dumb, seeing or blind,"⁷ not be able also to open the mouth of the dumb beast or the eyes of the blind? Should not He who killeth and giveth life have the power also to call the dead back to life, if He sees fit? Should not He who openeth the womb for every birth, be able to open it for her who is ninety years old? Or when a

¹ Ex. XV, 11.

² *Oth*, sign for miracle, Ex. IV, 8, 17, and elsewhere.

³ *Mopheth*, Ex. VII, 3, and elsewhere.

⁴ Gen. XVIII, 14.

⁵ Num. XI, 23.

⁶ Ex. XXXIV, 10; Num. XVI, 30.

⁷ Ex. IV, 11.

whole land is wicked, to shut the wombs of all its inhabitants that they may remain barren? Again, should not He who makes the sun come forth every morning from the gates of the East and enter each night the portals of the West, not be able to change this order once, and cause it to stand still in the midst of its course?¹

So long as natural phenomena are considered to be separate acts of the divine will, an unusual event is merely an extraordinary manifestation of this same power, "the finger of God." The people of Biblical times never questioned whether a miracle happened or could happen. Their concern was to see it as the work of the arm of God either for His faithful ones or against His adversaries.

2. With the advance of thought, miracles began to be regarded as interruptions of an established order of creation. The question then arose, why the all-knowing Creator should allow deviations from His own laws. As the future was present to Him at the outset, why did He not make provision in advance for such special cases as He foresaw? This was exactly the remedy which the rabbis furnished. They declared that at Creation God provided for certain extraordinary events, so that a latent force, established for the purpose at the beginning of the world, is responsible for incidents which appeared at the time to be true interferences with the world order. Thus God had made a special covenant, as it were, with the work of creation that at the appointed time the Red Sea should divide before Israel; that sun and moon should stand still at the bidding of Joshua; that fire should not consume the three youths, Hananel, Mishael, and Azariah; that the sea-monster should spit forth Jonah alive; together with other so-called miracles.² The same idea

¹ Josh. X, 12-14. See Joel: "D. Mosaismus u. d. Wunder," in *Jb. d. Jued. Gesch. u. Lit.*, 1904, p. 66-94.

² *Mek. Beshallah* 3; *Gen. R. V*, 4.

occasioned the other Haggadic saying that shortly before the completion of the creation on the evening of the sixth day God placed certain miraculous forces in nature. Through them the earth opened to swallow Korah and his band, the rock in the wilderness gave water for the thirsty multitude, and Balaam's ass spoke like a human being; through them also the rainbow appeared after the flood, the manna rained from heaven, Aaron's rod burst forth with almond blossoms and fruit, and other wondrous events happened in their proper time.¹

3. Neither the rabbis nor the medieval Jewish thinkers expressed any doubt of the credibility of the Biblical miracles. The latter, indeed, rationalized miracles as well as other things, and considered some of them imaginary. Saadia accepts all the Biblical miracles except the speaking serpent in Paradise and the speaking ass of Balaam, considering these to be parables rather than actual occurrences.² In general, both Jewish and Mohammedan theologians assumed that special forces hidden in nature were utilized by the prophets and saints to testify to their divine mission. These powers were attained by their lofty intellects, which lifted them up to the sphere of the Supreme Intellect. All medieval attempts to solve the problem of miracles were based upon this curious combination of Aristotelian cosmology and Mohammedan or Jewish theology.³ True, Maimonides rejects a number of miracles as contrary to natural law, and refers to the rabbinical saying that some of the miraculous events narrated in Scripture were so only in appearance. Still he claims for

¹ Aboth V, 6; comp. Ab. d. R. N., ed. Schechter, 95; Mek. Beshallah, 5; Sifre Debarim, 355; Pes. 54 a; P. d. R. Eli., XIX; Targ. Y. to Num. XXII, 28, where a different list of ten wondrous things is given.

² Emunoth we Deoth II, 44, 68. Comp. Ibn Ezra to Gen. III, 1, and Num. XXII, 28.

³ *Moreh*, II, 25, 35, 37; III, 24; *Yesode ha Torah*, VII, 7; VIII, 1-3. Comp. Joel: *Moses Maimonides*, p. 77.

Moses, as the Mohammedans did for Mohammed, miraculous powers derived from the sphere of the Supreme Intellect. In a lengthy chapter on miracles Albo follows Maimonides,¹ while his teacher Crescas considers the Biblical miracles to be direct manifestations of the creative activity of God.² Gersonides has really two opinions; in his commentary he reduces all miracles to natural processes, but in his philosophical work he adopts the view of Maimonides.³ Jehuda ha Levi alone insisted on the miracles of the Bible as historic evidence of the divine calling of the prophets.⁴ To all the rest, the miracle is not performed by God but by the divinely endowed man. God himself is no longer conceived of as changing the cosmic order. Both He and the world created by His will remain ever the same. Still, according to this theory, certain privileged men are endowed with special powers by the Supreme Intellect, and by these they can perform miracles.⁵ It is evident that in all this the problem of miracles is not solved, nor even correctly stated. Both rabbinical literature and the Bible abound with miracles about certain holy places and holy persons, which they never venture to doubt. But the rabbis were not miracle-workers like the Essenes and their Christian successors.⁶ On the contrary, they sought to repress the popular credulity and hunger for the miraculous, saying: "The present generation is not worthy to have mir-
his great Code: "Tara'ti be'elai 'el ha'elohim" in *Mishnah Berakot*, I, 18.
¹ *Ikkarim*, I, 18.
² *Or Adonai*, III, 5; comp. Joel: *Don Chasdai Crescas*, p. 70.
³ *Milhamoth Adonai*, last chapters; comp. J. E., art. Levi ben Gershom.
⁴ *Qazari*, II, 54.
⁵ The *Anshe maaseh*, mentioned together with the *Hasidim* in Suk. V, 4, and Sot. IX, 15, are wonderworkers, of whom Haninah ben Dosa, the last, is singled out. The same epithet was given to Simeon ben Yochai in Aramaic, *Iskan*, see Lev. Rabba, XXII, 2, and to R. Assi, eod. XIX, 11, where it means, worker in nature's realm. Thus Nahum of Gimzo is called "trained in the skill to perform miracles" — *Taan*, 21 a; Phinehas ben Jair was also a wonderworker — Hul. 7 a. (The whole portion regarding rain-miracles seems to be taken from a work on the miracles of saints.)

acles performed for them, like the former ones;"¹ or "The providing of each living soul with its daily food, or the recovery of men from a severe disease is as great a miracle as any of those told in Scripture;"² or again, "Of how small account is a person for whom the cosmic order must be disturbed!"³ Thus when the wise men of Rome asked the Jewish sages: "If your God is omnipotent, as you claim, why does He not banish from the world the idols, which are so loathsome to Him?" they replied: "Do you really desire God to destroy the sun, moon, and stars, because fools worship them? The world continues its regular course, and idolaters will not go unpunished."⁴

5. In Judaism neither Biblical nor rabbinical miracles are to be accepted as proof of a doctrinal or practical teaching.⁵ The Deuteronomic law expressly states that false prophets can perform miracles by which they mislead the multitude.⁶ We can therefore ascribe no intrinsic religious importance to miracles. The fact is that miracles occur only among people who are ignorant of natural law and thus predisposed to accept marvels. They are the products of human imagination and credulity. They have only a subjective, not an objective value. They are psychological, not physical facts.

The attitude of Maimonides and Albo toward Biblical miracles is especially significant. The former declares in his great Code:⁷ "Israel's belief in Moses and his law did not rest on miracles, for miracles rather create doubt in the mind of the believer. Faith must rest on its intrinsic truth, and this can never be subverted by miracles, which may be of a deceitful nature." Albo devotes a lengthy chapter to developing this idea still further, undoubtedly referring to the Church; he speaks of miracles wrought by both Biblical

¹ Taan. 18 b.² Pes. 118 a; Ned. 41 a.³ Shab. 53 b.⁴ Ab. Za. IV, 7; comp. Ber. 4 a, 20 a; Sanh. 97 b.⁵ B. M. 59 b.⁶ Deut. XIII, 2-6.⁷ *Yesode ha Torah*, VIII, 1-5.

and Talmudic heroes, such as Onias the rain-maker, Nicodemus ben Gorion, Hanina ben Dosa, and Phinehas ben Jair, the popular saints.¹ In modern times Mendelssohn, when challenged by the Lutheran pastor Lavater either to accept the Christian faith or refute it, attacked especially the basic Christian faith in miracles. He stated boldly that "miracles prove nothing, since every religion bases its claims on them and consequently the truth of one would disprove the convincing proof of the other."²

6. Our entire modern mode of thinking demands the complete recognition of the empire of law throughout the universe, manifesting the all-permeating will of God. The whole cosmic order is *one* miracle. No room is left for single or exceptional miracles. Only a primitive age could think of God as altering the order of nature which He had fixed, so as to let iron float on water like wood to please one person here,³ or to stop sun, star, or sea in their courses in order to help or harm mankind there.⁴ It is more important for us to inquire into the law of the mind by which the fact itself may differ from the peculiar form given it by a narrator. With our historical methods unknown to former ages, we cannot accept any story of a miracle without seeking its intrinsic historical accuracy. After all, the miracle as narrated is but a human conception of what, under God's guidance, really happened.

Accordingly, we must leave the final interpretation of the Biblical narratives to the individual, to consider them as historical facts or as figurative presentations of religious ideas. Even now some people will prefer to believe that the Ten Commandments emanated from God Himself in audible tones, as medieval thinkers maintained.⁵ Some will adopt the old semi-rationalistic explanation that He created a voice

¹ *Ikkarim*, I, 18.² Mendelssohn: *G. Sch.*, III, 65, 120 f., 320 f.³ II Kings VI, 6.⁴ Joshua X, 13.⁵ *Moreh*, II, 33.

for this special purpose. Others will hold it more worthy of God to communicate directly with man, from spirit to spirit, without the use of sensory means; these will therefore take the Biblical description as figurative or mythical. In fact, he who does not cling to the letter of the Scripture will probably regard all the miracles as poetical views of divine Providence, as child-like imagery expressing the ancient view of the eternal goodness and wisdom of God. To us also God is "a Doer of wonders," but we experience His wonder-working powers in ourselves. We see wonders in the acts of human freedom which rises superior to the blind forces of nature. The true miracle consists in the divine power within man which aids him to accomplish all that is great and good.

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¹ II Kings VI, 2. ² I Kings I, 18. ³ Mendelssohn: G. Sch., III, 62, 120 f., 220 f. ⁴ Joshua X, 13. ⁵ Moses, II, 33.

Ruler of a moral government. Thus He directs all the acts of men toward the end which He has set. Judaism is most sharply contrasted with heathenism at this point. Heathenism either deifies nature or merges the deity into nature. Thus there is no place for a God who knows all things and provides for all in a world of chance.

CHAPTER XXVIII
PROVIDENCE AND THE MORAL GOVERNMENT OF THE WORLD

1. None of the precious truths of Judaism has become more indispensable than the belief in divine Providence, which we see about us in ever new and striking forms. Man would succumb from fear alone, beholding the dangers about him on every side, were he not sustained by a conviction that there is an all-wise Power who rules the world for a sublime purpose. We know that even in direst distress we are guided by a divine hand that directs everything finally toward the good. Wherever we are, we are protected by God, who watches over the destinies of man as "does the eagle who hovers over her young and bears them aloft on her pinions." Each of us is assigned his place in the all-encompassing plan. Such knowledge and such faith as this comprise the greatest comfort and joy which the Jewish religion offers. Both the narratives and the doctrines of Scripture are filled with this idea of Providence working in the history of individuals and nations.

2. Providence implies first, *provision*, and second, *predestination* in accordance with the divine plan for the government of the world. As God's dominion over the visible world appears in the eternal order of the cosmos, so in the moral world, where action arises from freely chosen aims, God is

¹ The Hebrew term *Hashgaha* — Providence — is derived from Ps. XXXIII, 14, *hishgiah*, "He observes." See J. E., art. Providence; Davidson, l. c. 178-182; Hamburger, R. W. B., II, art. Bestimmung; Rauwenhoff, l. c. 538 f.; Ludwig Philippson: "Israel. Religionsl.," II, 98 f.; Formstecher: "Religion des Geistes," 114-119.