HE HAS WORKED MARVELS

By LEOPOLD SABOURIN

THE PSALMISTS seem never tired of repeating that God has worked marvels for his people, mainly at the Exodus (see, for example, Ps 78, 12; 98, 1). Other biblical authors express themselves in the same way, while insisting on the fact that God still performs such wonders (Job 5, 9; 9, 10). When we read the Old Testament accounts of miracles, the question to be asked should be perhaps 'why have they been written?' rather than 'what has really happened?' Living in a religious world in which the divinity was expected to manifest its presence in different ways, the ancients admitted the miraculous quite spontaneously. It was not the historicity of the events that was foremost in their minds; but what message do these extraordinary happenings convey?

For a spiritual reading of the bible, the events generally referred to as miracles were, for the Hebrews of the Old Testament or the disciples of the New, very rare and full of meaning. But it is by no means otiose or antipathetic to the christian faith to inquire also into the objective nature of these events, even as it is with wonderful happenings of our own day which are attributed to divine intervention. In either case, it is legitimate and useful to investigate what really took place. Faith cannot be built on illusions, and Luke carefully recalled in the prologue of his Gospel: 'that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed' (1, 4). With regard to the miracles of the Old Testament, it is particularly important to examine them in the light of the literary genres in which their accounts are embedded. Biblical revelation originated among a people that had close contacts with religious cultures – canaanite, egyptian, babylonian – in which magic and myth played a major role. However, although the writers of the Old Testament often used for their own representations mythical patterns of thought and language, they rejected myth as the ultimate explanation of the world. The world and man, they state, originated in creation; a unique God rules history, as he intervenes directly in favour of his people. In the bible there are no myths in

the strict sense; but there is mythical expression, and 'the marvellous' is abundant as the expression of what God wrought.

No theory of an autonomous world of nature following its own laws can be found in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact there is no word for nature in the hebrew bible. God's direct intervention on the course of nature raised no metaphysical problem for the Israelite. Nature and history being both divine creations, incessantly renewed, there is no room in the Old Testament for 'miracles' that would violate the laws of nature and history. The only true miracles are God himself, creation, and the history of Israel: 'Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought [heb *created*] in all the earth or in any nation' (Exod 34, 10). Miracles for the Israelite were included among the divine 'mighty works' along with creation, preservation and redemption. In fact, God's miracles are sometimes described in terms that recall creation, the greatest miracle of all, as in the Dothan and Abiram episode: 'If the Lord *creates* something new, and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows them up . . .' (Num 16, 30). Miracles prove that God has not abandoned his creation, but is constantly at work in it, guiding the course of nature and of history by frequent interventions. The very course of nature belongs to the miraculous. Having written that God does 'marvellous things without number', Job mentions as examples the bestowal of rain and the divine care of the humble (5, 9–11). According to Ps 89, 6, the heavens are God's wonder.

What for the Old Testament turns an event into a 'miracle' is less its abnormality than its 'evidential character'. It brings out God's providential rule, and points to his invisible power: 'The Israelite rightly sees in God's sovereign control of nature, as manifested also in his miracles, proof that the created order is totally dependent on the will of him who called it into being'.[1] There is no limit to divine power: 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' (Gen 18, 14). To know God and his ways leads to the consciousness of the miraculous in one's own life and in the course of events. Those who are alienated from God look in vain for miracles. They cannot raise their mind to the level of the transmaterial, to the domain of faith, to which the miraculous belongs. In our culture, which originated with the ancient Greeks, philosophy and science are secular enterprises based on human understanding. 'Biblical thought, on the other hand, proceeds on the assumption that

[1] Eichrodt, W.: *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol 2 (London, 1961), p 163.

knowledge comes from God'.[2] Revelation stands in the place of reason. True wisdom is fellowship with God, religion is the great enterprise of the biblical people; what counts is the meaning and purpose of life, found in God. Behind the modern problems about miracles there is always the unbiblical approach to a biblical question, a pseudo-confrontation between scientific dogmas and the assumptions of faith.

Only in the Wisdom of Solomon do we find a certain Old Testament theory of miracles.[3] In this work of the first century B.C., the miracles are parabolic, historical wonders of the past that disclose the general principles on which the world is based. They do not foreshadow, as in apocalyptic, the destruction of the world, but reveal what it is, under the guidance of Wisdom. Against the background of a rational explanation of the world, the book of Wisdom is an apologia of the jewish religion: 'In everything, O Lord, thou hast exalted and glorified thy people' (19, 22). God worked changes in nature to deliver Israel (19, 6–12): in the exodus, for example, nature and animals changed their customary action to effect God's redemptive purpose (19, 18–21). Miracles are 'not a derangement but a rearrangement of the harmony of the universe'.[4] Creation is wholesome and has no corruptive force within (1, 14); a destructive force crept from outside and generated death (2, 24). Generally speaking, the whole of creation serves God's purpose: 'The Lord will arm all creation to repel his enemies. Creation will join with him to fight against the madmen' (5,17.20); it serves God to punish the wicked and reward the righteous. In fact the wicked are punished by the very things by which they sin. Thus the Egyptians were tormented by the animals that they worshipped (11,16; 12,27; 16,1–4). God remained merciful in not sending fierce beasts instead of frogs and relatively harmless insects (11,17ff). Besides, he withheld punishment, to lead the sinners to repentance (11,23; 12,2).

The Exodus Epic

The Israelite paid greater attention to the theological meaning of the miracles in salvation history than to the wonderful phenomenological occurrences they involved. The deliverance of Israel at

[2] S. V. McCasland, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed G. A. Buttrick, 4 vols, New York, 1962), vol 3, p 397.

[3] See J. P. M. Sweet, 'The Theory of Miracles in the Wisdom of Solomon', in *Miracles* (ed C. F. D. Moule, London, 1965), pp 113–26.

[4] As formulated by A. T. S. Goodrick in his commentary on Wis 11, 20, in *Oxford Church Bible Commentary* (London, 1917).

the exodus was the great wonder, the different miracles which accompanied it are subordinate. Thus Exod 14, 31 (probably from the elohist source) sums up the event in the following words: 'And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses'. Israel's belief in miracles is therefore linked to her faith in God's working of salvation history. God's exceptional interventions had also the educational purpose of strengthening Israel's faith, which was destined to be their abiding effect, enabling future generations to trust in God with or without miracles.

From both content and literary genre, Exod 1–15 can be referred to as an Epic, embodying Israel's conception of its 'wonderful' origins. The book which reports the miraculous events of the exodus 'discloses an interweaving of traditions which preserve both the original Mosaic tradition and the interpretations of subsequent generations'.[5] The traditions preserved in the book of Exodus describe the wonderful signs which accompanied the mission of Moses. It cannot be doubted that the events narrated impressed strongly those immediately involved, allowing their remembrance of them to take shape and be perpetuated in periodic festal celebrations, in which God's marvellous action through Moses was recounted, and the stories about it multiplied and amplified. Thus, it may be true to view several sections of Exodus as 'cultic legends'.[6]

Although it will never be possible to find out what precisely took place at the exodus, we know better now what sort of historical truth can be expected from our texts. We must always bear in mind when reading them that they received their initial written form perhaps 300 years after the events: that is, during the early monarchy, or even much later, if the priestly tradition is independently represented in Exodus, as would seem to be the case. The book of Exodus probably received its final editing only in the fifth century, but it incorporates traditions that are much older. Exodus is the end product of successive re-readings in faith, in a community which consciously sought to actualize the original events, drawing lessons from them for its present life. The reports on the exodus miracles are loaded with prophetic interpretations, cultic evocations and prayerful reflections transmitted and amplified in the religious traditions of the national sanctuaries.

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[5] *Oxford Annotated Bible* (1962), p 67.

[6] See J. Pedersen, *Israel, its Life and Culture*, III-IV (Copenhagen, 1940), pp 406ff; and G. E. Wright, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, ed. cit.*, vol 2, pp 194ff.

The narrative of the 'plagues' has its own literary genre: it is a drama, with acts and scenes, involving primary and secondary characters, dialogues, and a variety of suspense-creating devices. All this gives life and perspective to the narrative. The very nature of the genre adopted excludes the necessity of taking the sequence of events as based on historical records. A typically biblical pattern used in the interpretation of history is also at work here: influential personages, like Pharaoh and the kings of Israel, or even nations, are judged in the light of the later turn of events. It is significant that a recurring phrase in the Exodus chapters, 'thus says the Lord', is the formula used by the canonical prophets of Israel.

The events narrated are called 'wonders' both at the beginning and at the end of the plague chapters (Exod 7, 9; 11, 9). The term *môpet* (used here for 'wonder') can be said of an extraordinary happening (Ps 71, 7), of a foreboding (Isai 8, 18; 20, 3), or even of a miracle in the strict sense (1 Kg 12, 3. 5). But it can also designate natural facts serving as signs or tests of fidelity (Deut 7, 19; 29, 3). The term *magepa*, 'beating', used in Exod 9, 14 (cf 11, 1), often designates a 'plague' of mysterious origin, therefore sent by God, not rarely 'pestilence' (cf Num 14, 37).

The sign reported in Exod 4, 24 is obviously connected with serpent magic. It shows Moses outdoing the professionals of the 'secret arts'. He reverses the trick whereby a snake was made rigid by hypnotism, and could be picked up by the tail. The 'rod', as instrument of miraculous power, had connections with magic: it may have been introduced for this particular sign, then retained for the other acts of power. In the priestly tradition, the rod of Moses becomes that of Aaron, the priestly eponym (Exod 7, 8–13). Note the confusion in Exod 7, 17: the rod in the Lord's hand!

In the opening scene (7, 8–13), which is a priestly version of a previous prelude (4, 2–5), Aaron's rod swallows the rod of the magician of Egypt. This may express symbolically that in the contest Yahweh will overcome the resistance of the Egyptians. It should be noted besides that a direct personal encounter between Moses and Pharaoh (7, 15) is very unlikely. That tradition has amplified both the extent and the miraculous nature of the plagues appears most clearly in the fact that now all the water of Egypt is to be turned into blood (7, 19 – priestly tradition), whereas 4, 9 (jahwist) speaks only of some water from the Nile poured upon the dry ground (though the jahwist extends the phenomenon to the whole Nile in 7, 18). It is unnecessary to repeat in detail what

commentators have long noticed: that all the plagues, except the last, may be little else than an exceptional concurrence, on an unfamiliar scale, of natural phenomena periodically occurring in Egypt along the Nile. Such an unprecedented convergence of calamities, providentially patterned, at the time of the exodus, would explain the origin of this extraordinary story which gave a concrete form to the israelite faith in God's salvific intervention. According to M. Noth, however, there exists no clear connection between the changing of the water into blood and the annual reddening of the Nile's rising water (from the various alluvial deposits), since this did not make the water undrinkable nor kill the fish in the river. The sacred writer had in mind a unique divine wonder: Egypt as depending on the Nile for its survival.[7]

The logical sequence of events does not seem to bother the jahwist author in his description of the fifth and sixth plagues. The cattle reported all dead in 9, 6 are still threatened by the hail-storm in 9, 19. Another anomaly has been noted: the hail is described in 9, 23–25 from a palestinian rather than from an egyptian viewpoint. The explicit mention of an east wind and a west wind in 10, 13. 19, to explain the appearance of the locusts and their disappearance, adds to the feeling that a natural phenomenon is involved. The wind is also instrumental in other miracles, like the crossing of the Red Sea (14, 21) and the episode of the quails (Num 11, 31). The 'thick darkness' of the ninth plague reflects the conditions created by the hot desert wind, the *khamsin*; but Exod 10, 23 presents a hyperbolic account of the phenomenon. A further amplification is recorded in Wis 17. Besides, 'darkness' is a commonplace feature of the prophetic descriptions of the 'day of the Lord' (cf Amos 5, 18–20). A locust plague also figures, in Joel 1–2, as the expression of divine judgment. The tenth plague, the death of the first-born of Egypt, is often explained as a cult-legend formed upon the Passover rite, and the dedication of the first-born to Yahweh (cf Exod 4, 22–23). An epidemic, which had struck Pharaoh's first-born and other children, may have provided a theme in the passover ritual. Natural explanations have been proposed for other 'miracles' of the exodus context as well. Num 11, 31 offers a theological explanation of a natural phenomenon: quails migrate in that desert region and, when exhausted, are easily caught. Modern medicine confirms what past commentators had conjectured: eating quail which feed on poisonous plants may cause illness and death (cf

[7] Noth, M.: *Exodus* (London, 1962), p 74.

Num 11, 33–35).[8] The 'miraculous' water from the rock (Exod 17, 1–6; Num 20, 2–13) could be related to a geological phenomenon: in some regions of the Sinai desert water lies below the limestone surface, and a single blow can uncover a source of drinking water.

Other Old Testament miracles

The 'private miracles' of Elijah and Elisha do not seem to have any adequate theological significance. Exceptions are perhaps Elijah's cure of Naaman. The syrian commander acknowledged 'that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel (2 Kg 5, 15); but Elisha himself had given a narrower motivation: 'Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel' (2 Kg 5, 8). Objective reasons can in fact be adduced for regarding as partly or fully legendary most of the miracles attributed to Elijah and Elisha. Apart from the lack of proper motivation, their very number seems to classify them as anecdotes which prophetic confraternities recounted about two of their professionals (cf 2 Kg 2; 15). Elijah miraculously supplied the widow with meal and oil, raised her son to life, drew fire from heaven to consume the Carmel sacrifice and also Ahaziah's troops (2 Kg 1), divided the Jordan, and was taken up to heaven (2 Kg 2, 2).

Elisha, for his part, divided the Jordan, sweetened the waters of Jericho, caused the bears to devour the mocking children, provided Jehoshaphat's army with water, supplied a widow with oil, raised the Shunamite's son to life, made harmless the poisoned soup, fed a hundred men with twenty loaves, cured Naaman's leprosy (then transferred it to Gehazi in punishment), caused an an axehead to float, and disorientated the syrian army (2 Kg 2–6). Three of these miracles are little more than literary duplicates of the same told about Elijah. In fact, all Elijah's miracles are in one way or another parallelled in Elisha's performances. Elisha is not taken up to heaven alive, but a dead man is raised to life upon touching his bones (2 Kg 3, 21). Elisha's staff was apparently credited (like that of Moses: see Exod 4, 17) with magical powers; but the sequel (to 2 Kg 4, 29) will show that nothing can be done without the prophet's prayer and presence. On various occasions Elisha acted as a man endowed with an unusual extra-sensory perception (2 Kg 5, 26; 6, 8. 14). The story of the contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kg 18), opposing Elijah to the false prophets of Baal, can be described

[8] See X. Jacques, 'Les cailles étaient-elles empoisonnées?', in *Science et Esprit* 20 (1968).

as a 'prophetic legend'. It *edifies* through the display of the marvellous power of God released in favour of his servant the prophet. The tale is composed as a drama: first, the situation is described, involving an intolerable state of conflict; then comes a climax of tension with the sacrificial contest; a spectacular *dénouement* resolves the situation: God intervenes and the false prophets die.

Theological and literary reasons suggest that the narratives of the 'cycle of miracles' associated with Elijah and Elisha are not to be taken as a record of historical occurrences in the proper sense. They can be described as a fine collection of prophetic lore. G. Quell classified them as *biographische Legenden.*[9] This does not mean that all occurs in the realm of fancy. For example, 1 Kg 18, 26–29 presents a correct picture of the Baal cult, and Elijah's lament at the Horeb (1 Kg 19, 14) contains illuminating information on the religious conditions in the Northern Kingdom during the ninth century B.C.[10] Miracles figure in ancient times among the ways of portraying the importance of religious leaders. In our narratives, miracle stories recount 'the great things' which the two prophets have done (2 Kg 8, 4). Considering the great political influence exercised by these two champions of the true faith, and the place they occupy in the israelite tradition, it should be assumed that they were endowed with an exceptional spiritual power, which at times manifested itself in deeds worthy to be called miraculous.

The wonders that accompany the Israelites at Jericho and during the conquest have been called 'creations of popular tradition'.[11] They are certainly in line with the presentation which the author intended in Joshua: the conquest was a holy war (cf Exod 15, 3). In fact, some writers see the entire conquest as a miracle rather than as a military achievement. W. Johnstone finds that Jos 1–12 illustrates the presence of mythological history within the Old Testament.[12] In Jos 10, 13b, 'the sun stayed in the midst of heaven', is a prosaic literalizing of the poetic imagery of 12b–13a, taken from an ancient collection, now lost, of hebrew poetry.[13] The theme

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[9] G. Quell, 'Das Phänomen des Wunders in Alten Testament', in *Verbannung und Heimkehr, Festschrift W. Rudolph* (Tübingen, 1961), p 279.

[10] See G. Hentschel, 'Die Elijaerzählungen', in *Erfurter Theologische Studien*, 33 (Leipzig, 1977), p 345.

[11] See J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p 459. For a comprehensive survey of the biblical and modern miracles, see also L. Sabourin, *The Divine Miracles, Discussed and Defended* (Catholic Book Agency, Rome, 1977).

[12] W. Johnstone, 'The Mythologising of History in the Old Testament', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971), pp 213–15.

[13] *Oxford Annotated Bible*, p 275.

is not unknown in other sources (cf Homer Odyssey XXIII, 243–46). The royal staircase sun miracle connected with Hezekiah's illness (2 Kg 20, 8–11; Isai 38, 7–8) was more likely intended to symbolize the retreat of the shadow of death (cf Ps 102, 11).

Conclusion

In the exodus traditions, there is less emphasis on the physical wonders than on the unexpected liberation from servitude through God's mercy (Ps 138), and the transfer to a new life, in which bread from heaven (Exod 16, 4), bread for angels (Wis 16, 20) becomes man's food. More wonderful still is the food of the heavenly Torah (Deut 8, 3). This indicates the pattern of the Old Testament view on miracles. Many difficulties raised in the mind of modern believers by miracles stem from accentuating the wrong aspect, namely the apologetic: as if miracles were above all else proofs of God's direct intervention, scientifically verifiable; whereas in fact they are mainly signs perceived by faith.

On the other hand, it is essential to remember that in all miracles, properly so called, there are two levels of signification: one, the extraordinary fact, naturally inexplicable; the other, the religious meaning which the believer perceives. Indeed, a miracle in the true sense is attributable to God alone, intervening directly beyond the ordinary laws of nature. To understand and accept this, *faith* is needed; as it is also needed to perceive the symbolical meaning of the miracle, or its meaning in the more general religious context to which it belongs. But the miracle can also lead the unbeliever to faith, if he is brought by it to consider, and finally to accept, the interpretation proposed by the believer. It is true that we believe, not because of the miracles, but because of the word of God. However, for many, the miracle remains the outstanding tangible proof that God has spoken. Thus even the magicians, who had duplicated some of the wonders wrought by Moses, were led to admit they could not reproduce others, because these were truly indicative of God's power: 'This is the finger of God', they said (Exod 8, 19). For the Israelite, no law of nature can hinder God from enlisting the forces of nature in his service. What the bible teaches about God is certainly incompatible with an outright refusal of the possibility of miracles; nor, in our view, is it possible to accept the credibility of the evangelists, and at the same time deny that the Gospels report miracles as true in the sense in which modern authors also understand them.