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Spinoza on Miracles

Editor Charles H. Smith's Note: The following texts represent transcriptions I made in August 2019 of English translations of Chapter 6, 'Of Miracles', of **Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus***, first published by Spinoza in Latin in 1670.

Enjoy!

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The first, and earlier, Chapter VI translation given here is from pages 125 through 154 of the work, in the edition wearing the title: *A Treatise Partly Theological, And Partly Political, Containing some few Discourses, To prove that the Liberty of Philosophizing (that is Making Use of Natural Reason) may be allow'd without any prejudice to Piety, or to the Peace of any Common-wealth; And that the Loss of Public Peace and Religion it self must necessarily follow, where such a Liberty of Reasoning is taken away*. The name of the translator is not given, but it was printed in London in 1689, twelve years after Spinoza's death in 1677.

[125]

CHAP. VI.

Of Miracles.

As Men use to call that knowledge Divine, which exceeds human capacity and understanding; so when any thing is done in nature, of which the common People know not the cause, that they call the Work of God: for the vulgar believe Gods Power and Providence do most plainly appear, when they see any thing strange and unusual happen in nature, contrary to the customary opinion they have of Nature; especially when that which happens, is for their benefit and advantage; and they think the being of a God never more clearly proved, then when nature seems not to keep its constant course; and therefore conclude, that those Men deny the Being and Providence of God, who endeavour to explain and understand what they call Miracles by their natural causes. They indeed think, that

[126] while Nature goes on in her wonted course, God doth nothing, and on the contrary, when God Acts, the Power of Nature and Natural Causes are idle and at a stand: so that they imagin two numerical distinct Powers, namely the Power of God, and the Power of Nature appointed and directed (or as most Men now believe) Created by God; but what they mean by either, or what they understand by God and Nature, they know not, but fancy Gods Power to be like that of a great King. And the Power of Nature nothing but blind force and violence, the Common People therefore, call the extraordinary Works of Nature, Miracles, or the Works of God, and partly out of Devotion, partly out of a desire to contradict those that love the Study of Natural Sciences, they affect, being ignorant of Natural Causes, desiring to hear of things they do not know, and those things, which they least know, they most admire: by taking away Natural Causes, and by imagining things out of the order of Nature, they think God is most adored when all things are

immediately referr'd to his Power and Will; neither do they think the Power of God at any time so wonderful, as when according to their fancy, it conquers and subdues the Power of Nature. Which

[127] Opinion was first brought into the World by the *Jews*, who to convince the Heathen, that then Worshipt the Sun, Moon, the Earth, Water, Air, &c. told them their Gods were weak, inconstant, mutable, and subject to the Power of the invisible God; whose Miracles they proclaim'd, and by them endeavour'd to prove, that the whole frame of Nature was by the Power of that God whom they worshipt, created chiefly for their good and benefit: with which Opinion Men were so pleas'd, that ever since they have not ceased to fain Miracles, that they may be thought better beloved by God then others; and that the end and purpose of Gods making and preserving all things, was chiefly for their sakes. How arrogant is the foolish Vulgar who conceive nothing rightly of God or Nature, but confound the Ordinances of God, with the imaginations of Men, and think Nature so narrow, that they believe Man to be the principal part thereof. Having thus discovered the Opinions and Prejudices of the Common People concerning God and Nature, I will proceed in order, and shew first, that nothing can happen contrary to Nature, whose order and course, is eternal, constant and immutable, explaining also what is a Miracle. *Secondly*,

[128] that we cannot know the essence, existence, nor consequently the providence of God by Miracles, but they more manifestly appear, in the constant and unchangeable order of Nature. *Thirdly*, I will prove by some Scripture Examples, that the Scripture it self, by the decrees, purposes and providence of God, means nothing else but that regular course of Nature, which necessarily follows from its eternal Laws. *Lastly*, I will shew, how Scripture Miracles are to be interpreted, and what we are principally to observe in the Relations we have of Miracles: all which particulars, are the subject of this present *Chapter*, and will be very useful to the design of this whole Treatise. The first Particular is proved, by what we have said in the 4th *Chapter* Concerning the Divine Law, (namely) that whatsoever God willeth and decreeth, implyes eternal verity and necessity; for the Knowledge of God is not distinguisht from his Will, and we say the same thing, when we say God willeth, and God knoweth any thing; because by the same necessity, derived from the Nature and Perfection of God, whereby he knoweth any thing to be what it is, by the same necessity, must God will that thing to be what it is: but since nothing is necessarily true, but what is so by the Will

[129] and Decree of God; it clearly follows, that the Universal Laws of Nature, are the very Ordinances of God, which flow from the necessity and perfection of his Divine Nature. Whatever therefore cometh to pass in Nature, which is repugnant to its Universal Laws, that must necessarily be contrary to the Decree and Knowledge of the Divine Nature; or if any one conclude that God doth any thing against the Laws of Nature, he likewise must grant, that God Acts contrary to his own Nature, which is the greatest of all Absurdities. As therefore nothing happens in Nature, contrary to its Universal Laws, so neither doth any thing happen, which doth not agree with, and follow from them; for whatever is done, is done by the Will and eternal Decree of God (that is) according to Laws and Rules, which imply eternal Verity and Necessity: and therefore tho' the Laws in which are contained eternal Verity and Necessity, be not known to us, yet Nature always observes them, and consequently keeps her constant and unchangeable course. No rational Man can believe the Power and Vertue of Nature to be limited, and its Laws confin'd to some particular Operations and Effects, and not fitted Universally to all; for since the Power and Vertue of

[130] Nature, is the very Vertue and Power of God; we ought to believe the Power of Nature infinite, and the Laws of Nature so general, that they extend themselves to all things, which fall under the comprehension of the Divine Knowledge: otherwise it must be granted, that God Created Nature so weak and impotent, and its Laws and Rules so defective, that to preserve and maintain Nature, he must upon every new occasion assist and succour it, that things may fall out according to his Will; which is very irrational for any Man to suppose. If then nothing happens in Nature, which doth not follow from its Rules and Laws, that its Laws are extended to all things within the compass of Divine Knowledge, and that Nature keeps a fixed immutable and regular Course; it is manifest that whatever Men call a Miracle, is only so in respect of their Opinions, and signifies nothing else but some work or thing done, of which we cannot discover the natural Cause, by an example of any thing that ordinarily happens like it; at least the Person cannot, who relates or records the Miracle. I might call that a Miracle, whose cause cannot be made out from any natural Principles known by the Light of Nature; but because Miracles were wrought according to the Ca-

[131] pacity of the Vulgar, who knew not the principles of natural things, it is certain that the Antients counted that a Miracle, which they could not explain as the common People use to do natural things, namely, by recurring to their Memory, for bringing to mind some other thing of the like kind, which they did not admire: for the common People think, they very well understand a thing, when they do not admire it. By this Rule and no other, Men in old and later times, have judged of Miracles, and it is not to be doubted, but many things are related in Scripture for Miracles, whose causes might have been made manifest from the known principles of natural things, as we have hinted in our *2d Chapter*, where we spoke of the Suns standing still in the time of *Joshua*, and its going backward in the time of *Hezekiah* on the Dyal of *Ahaz*, but of these things more at large, when I come to speak of the Interpretation of Miracles. I will now go on to prove the Second particular, namely that we cannot by miracles understand the Essence, Existence, or Providence of God, but that they are more clearly apprehended by us, in the fixed and immutable order of nature, which I thus prove. If the Existence of God be not of it self known to us, it must then be made out and con-

[132] cluded from Notions whose verity is so firm and unshaken, that there cannot be a Power by which those Notions may be changed, at least, they ought to appear so to us at that time, when from them we conclude the existence of God, if we will have that existence to be indubitable: for if we could think those Notions mutable by any Power whatever it be; then might we doubt of the Truth of those Notions, and consequently of our conclusion, namely God's Existence; nor could we be certain of any thing, and seeing we cannot know what is congruous or contrary to Nature, but that which we prove to be congruous, or contrary to those Prime Notions; if we could conceive any thing in Nature to be done, by any other Power whatever contrary to Nature, that must also be contrary to those first Notions, and so be rejected as absurd and against Reason; or else we must doubt of our prime Notions, and consequently of God, and all things else. Miracles therefore in what manner soever we apprehend them, as they are understood to be Works contrary to the Order of Nature; are far from proving God's existence, they rather bring it into Question, for without Miracles we may be assur'd of it, namely, by knowing that all things observe the certain and immuta-

[133] ble Order of Nature; but granting that to be a miracle, which cannot be explained and made known by natural Causes, we ought then either to conclude, that it hath natural Causes, but such as cannot be found out by Human Understanding, or that it hath no immediate Cause, but God or

his Will; but if all things which are effected by Natural Causes, are done only by the Power and Will of God, we must necessarily at last come to this, that whether a Miracle have natural Causes or not, it is a Work which cannot be manifested by a Natural Cause (that is) 'tis a Work which exceeds Human Capacity, and from a Work that exceeds Human Understanding, we can understand and collect nothing: for whatever we clearly and distinctly understand, we do it by the thing it self, or some other; and that which is clearly and distinctly understood by it self, ought to be perfectly known to us; therefore by a miracle, or any Work exceeding Human Capacity, we cannot conceive God's Essence or Existence, nor can we absolutely understand any thing of God or Nature: but on the contrary, when we know all things to be ordained and established by God, and that the Operations of Nature necessarily flow from the Essence of God, and that the Laws of Nature, are the Eternal De-

[134] crees and purposes of God; it must necessarily be concluded, that we so much the better know God and his Will, by how much the better we understand and know Natural Things, how they depend in their first Cause, and how they operate according to the Eternal Laws, of Nature: So that in Respect of our Understanding, with much more Reason are those Works to be called the Works of God and his Will, which we clearly and distinctly understand, then those of which we are totally ignorant, tho' they strangely effect our imagination, and cause our wonder; because only those Works of Nature, which we clearly and distinctly know, render our Knowledge of God more sublime, and more evidently declare the Will and Decrees of God: So that those Men do but trifle, who, when they do not understand a thing, run presently to the Will of God, and ridiculously betray their own Ignorance, moreover, whatever we conclude from miracles, yet the Existence of God cannot in any manner be concluded from them; for since a miracle is a limited Work, and expresseth only a certain and limited Power, we cannot from such an Effect, conclude the Existence of a Cause whose Power is infinite; but only of a Cause whose Power at most, is greater then that Effect.

[135] I say at most, because from many concurring Causes, there may follow an effect, whose Vertue and Power may be less then all the Causes together, and yet much greater then the Power of any one of those Causes taken single; but because the Laws of Nature. As we have already shewn, extend themselves to things Infinite, being conceived by us under a kind of Eternity, and Nature by them proceeds in a certain and unchangeable course; so far do those Laws in some measure declare to us, the Eternity and Immutability of God; and therefore we conclude that neither God's Being or Providence, can be known by miracles; but may much better be concluded from the fixed and unalterable Course of Nature: I speak now of a miracle, as it is taken for a Work that is above Human Capacity, or believ'd to be so; for as it is supposed to be a Work, that interrupts or perverts the Order of Nature, or is repugnant to its Laws; it is so far from giving us any Knowledge of God, that it takes away, that which we naturally have, and makes us doubt of God and all other things. Nor do I know any difference between a thing done contrary to Nature, and that which is done above Nature (that is as some explain themselves) a thing which is not done contrary to the Order of Nature,

[136] but yet is not effected and produced by Nature: for seeing a miracle is not wrought out of Nature, but within the Compass of it; tho' it be concluded to be above Nature; yet it must necessarily interrupt Natures Order, which, by the Decrees of God, we conceived to be fixed and immutable; and therefore whatever is done in Nature, which doth not follow from the Rules of Nature, that must necessarily be repugnant to that Order, which God to all Eternity by Universal Laws establisht in Nature, and consequently, being against Nature, and its Laws, the believing it

must bring all things into doubt, and lead us to Atheism, So that by what hath been said, I hope I have so proved the Second Particular, that we may again conclude a miracle, whether contrary to Nature or above it, to be a meer absurdity, and that by a miracle nothing can be understood in Scripture, but a Work of Nature, which is indeed above Human Understanding, or at least believed to be so. Before I proceed to the Third Particular, I resolve to prove from Scripture; that we cannot know God by Miracles: indeed the Scripture doth no where Litterally say so, but we may conclude it from the 13. *Chap. of Deut.* Where *Moses* commands the People to put any Prophet to death, who went about to

[137] seduce them: *And tho' the Sign, and the Wonder come to pass whereof he spake unto thee, an yet thou shalt not hearken to the Words of the Prophet, for the Lord your God proveth you; that Prophet shall be put to death.* From whence it clearly follows, that miracles might be done by false Prophets, and unless men were fortified with the true Knowledge and Love of God; they might be induced by miracles to worship false Gods, as well as the true: *Moses* adds, *because the Lord your God proveth you to know, whether you love him with all your Heart, and with all your Soul.* The *Israelites* notwithstanding all their miracles, had no right Notions of God, which appears by Experience, for in the Absence of *Moses*, they called upon *Aron* to make them visible *Gods*, who to their Eternal shame, made them after so many Miracles done, a *Calf* to represent *God.* *Asaph*, who had heard of so many miracles, yet doubted of God's Providence; and had he not at last understood what was true Happiness, he had gone out of the right Way, *Psalms*. 73. *Solomon* also in whose time the *Jews* were in their highest Prosperity, believed that all things happened by chance, *Eccles. Chap. 3. v. 19, 20, 21. and chap. 9. v. 2, 3.* The very Prophets themselves, knew not how to reconcile the Course of Nature and Human Events, with the Notions they had of

[138] God's Providence; but to Wisemen whose Knowledge is not built on miracles, but upon clear and distinct conceptions, the thing is very evident, especially to those who place true Happiness in Vertue and Tranquility of Mind; and study more to submit to Nature, then to make Nature obedient to them; knowing certainly, that God directeth Nature as its own Universal Laws, and not as the particular Laws of Human Nature require; and that God hath a care not only of Mankind, but of the whole Frame of Nature in general; and it appears by Scripture, that miracles cannot teach us to know God or his Providence, tho' we find in Scripture that God wrought miracles to be known to Men. *Exod. Chap. 10. v. 2.* The wonders which he did in *Egypt*, were to convince the *Israelites*, that there was a God; yet it doth not follow, that the miracles themselves taught them to know God, but only that the *Jews* were prepossessed with such Opinions, that they would easily be perswaded by those signs: for as I have already shewed in the Second Chapter, that the conceptions, which the Prophets had by Revelation, were not drawn from Universal and common Notions; but from concessions sometimes absurd, and from the Opinions of those, to whom the Revelations

[139] were made; and from theirs, whom the Holy Spirit would convince, as we have proved by many Examples, and the Testimony of *Paul*, who was to the *Jews* a *Jew*, and with the *Grecians* a *Greek*. But tho' those Miracles were sufficient to convince the *Israelites*, and the *Egyptians*, from their own Principles, that there was a God, yet they were not able to give them a right understanding and *Idea* of *God*; they understood nothing more by them, then that there was a Power greater, then all other known Beings, and that that Power took a particular care of the *Jews*, whose Affairs were at that time, so prosperous above all other Nations; but did not teach them, that God hath an equal care of all Mankind, which we know only by *Philosophy* or true

Wisdom; and therefore the *Jews*, and all that knew nothing of God's Providence, but from the different State of Human Affairs, and from the disparity of men's Fortunes, perswaded themselves, that the *Jews* were better beloved by God, then all other Nations; tho' they did not excel any other People in Human perfection, as we have already declared in our Third Chapter. We now proceed to the Third Particular, that is to prove by Scripture, that the Commands and Decrees of God, and consequently his Providence, are in-

[140] deed nothing else, but the regular Course of Nature (that is), when the Scripture saith, any thing was done by God, or the Will of God, nothing more is to be understood, then that it was done according to the Order and Rules of Nature, and not as the Vulgar imagine, that Nature was idle and ceased from Action, or that the Order of Nature, was for sometime interrupted. The Scripture doth not give us the true Knowledge of things, which do not concern its Doctrine, because, as we have already declared, it needless, it meddles not with demonstrating things by their natural Causes, nor with things that are meerly Speculative; and therefore to prove by consequence, what we intend; we will quote some Scripture Histories, whose Relations are fullest of Circumstances. In the first Book of *Sam. Chap. 9. v. 15, 16.* It is said, that God told *Samuel* in his Ear, that he would send *Saul* to him; and yet God did not send him, as Men use to send Messengers one to another, but this mission of God, was nothing but the Order and Course of Nature; for *Saul* sought his Father's lost *Asses*, and thinking he should not find them; by Advice of his Father's Servant, he went to the Prophet *Samuel*, to know if he could tell him where they were; nor doth it appear any where in the whole Relation, that

[141] *Saul* had any particular Command from God, beside this natural Course to go to *Samuel*. *Psal. 105. v. 24.* 'Tis said, that God turned the Heart of the *Egyptians* to hate the *Israelites*: which turning was Natural; as appears by the first *Chap. of Exodus*, where very good Reasons are given, for the *Egyptians* keeping the *Israelites* in subjection. In the *9th. Chap. of Gen. v. 13.* God saith to *Noah*, that he would set his Bow in the Cloud; which Action of God was nothing, but the Reflection and Refraction of the Sun-Beams, in the minute drops of Rain Water. *Psal. 147. v. 18.* The natural Operation, and warmth of the Wind, by which, Frost and Snow are melted, is called the Word of God; and *v. 15.* the Wind is called the Commandment of God, *Psal. 104. v. 4.* The Wind and the Fire are called the Messengers and Ministers of God, and many other like places in Scripture clearly shew, that the Decree, the Command, the Saying and Word of God, are nothing else but the Operation and Order of Nature; and without doubt many things which are related in Scripture, and attributed to God, naturally come to pass; because it was not the intent of Scripture, to give us an account of things by their natural Causes; but only to relate those things which strongly possess the imagi-

[142] nation, and in such manner and stile, as was most likely to cause admiration and fill Mens minds with Devotion. If then we find in Scripture some things, of whose natural causes we are ignorant, or that seem to have happen'd against the order of nature; we are not presently to doubt, but believe, that what did really happen, came to pass by the course of nature; which is confirm'd by the many Circumstances that accompany'd miracles, tho' the Circumstances were not particularly related, or were at least poetically related: I say the Circumstances clearly prove, that the miracles required, and had natural causes. When the *Egyptians* were to be smitten with the Plague of boiles, *Moses* was to cast up and sprinkle Ashes into the Air, *Exod. chap. 9. v. 10.* The Locusts also by Gods natural command, namely by an *East Wind* blowing a whole Day and Night, covered the Land of *Egypt*, and left it again with a strong *West Wind*, *Exod. chap. 10. v. 13. 19.* By the command of God, was a way made through the Sea for the *Jews*, by an *East Wind*

that blew a whole Night *Exod. chap. 14. v. 21.* when the Prophet *Elisha* was to raise the Child, thought to be dead, he several times stretched himself upon the Body, till he grew warm and opened his Eyes, in the *2d. Book of Kings*

[143] *chap. 4. v. 34, 35.* so also in the *9th chap. of St. Johns Gospel*, some Circumstances are mentioned which Christ used, when he Cured the blind Man; many other things are related in Scripture, which all declare that miracles require somewhat more then the absolute command of God; and therefore tho' all the Circumstances of miracles and their natural causes, be not always particularly exprest; yet we ought to believe, that miracles were not wrought without them. Which appears by the *14th chap. of Exod. v. 27.* where it is said, that only upon the stretching out of *Moses's* hand, the Sea returned again to its full strength, without making mention of any Wind; yet in the *15 chap. of Exod. called Moses's Song v. 10.* it is said, *thou didst blow with thy Wind* (that is a strong Wind) *and the Sea covered them.* So that this Circumstance was omitted in the Story, to make the miracle appear the greater: but some will urge, that we find many things in Scripture, which cannot in appearance be explain'd by natural causes; as that the sins of Men may be the cause of the Earths Barrenness, and Mens Prayers the cause of its Fertility; that Faith may give sight to the Blind, with other things of the like kind, recorded in the Old and New *Testament:* but to this I have already given Answer, in shewing that the Scrip-

[144] ture, doth not give us the knowledge of things by their next immediate causes, but only relates things in that order, and expresseth them in such Words and Phrases, as are most likely to stir Men up, especially the multitude to Devotion; and for that reason speaks many times very improperly of God, and the things it treats of, not so much to convince our reason, as to affect and possess our minds, and our imaginations; if the Scripture should relate the destruction of any Empire, in the same manner that Historians and Politicians use to do, it would not at all affect the Common People, but when the overthrow of a Kingdom is poetically described, and declared to be the immediate Work of God's own hand, how strangely are Men moved with it? When the Scripture saith, that for the Sins of Men, the Earth is barren, or that blind Men are restored to sight by Faith; it signifies no more then do those other Sayings, that God is angry or grieved with our Sins, that he repents of the good he hath done, or intended, and that God by seeing a Sign called to mind his promise, all which Expressions are spoken poetically, or according to the Opinions and Prejudices of the Writer; so that we absolutely conclude, that all things which the Scripture relates to have happen'd, did

[145] happen as all things do, according to the Laws of Nature; and if in Scripture there be any thing recorded which by plain and evident Demonstration, may be proved to be repugnant to the Laws of Nature, or impossible to follow from them; we ought to believe it was inserted by Sacrilegious Men; for whatever is against Nature, is against Reason, and whatever is against Reason, ought to be rejected as absurd. Nothing now remains, but only to say somewhat of interpreting Miracles, or rather to recollect what hath been already said, and illustrate it by some Example, which is the fourth Particular I promis'd to treat of. That no body by mistaking a Miracle, may think there is something in Scripture which is contrary to the Light of Nature. It seldom happens that Men relate any thing that comes to pass so nakedly and truly, but that to their Relations they add somewhat of their own conceits; yea when they see or hear any thing, unless they beware of their own preconceived Opinions, they will be so far prepossesed, that they will never rightly understand what they see or hear, especially if what hath happen'd be above the Capacity of the Spectator or Relator, and it be for his advantage that the thing should happen in that very man-

[146] ner: hence it is that Men in their Histories and Chronicles, rather vent their own Opinions, then make faithful Relations, and one and the same Matter of Fact, related by two Men of different Opinions, shall be so diversly represented, that it shall seem two different Cases; so that oft times it is not very difficult, by the very Histories to discover what were the Opinions of the Historians: to Evidence this, I might cite many Philosophers, who have Written Histories of Nature, as well as Chronologers, but I will make use of only one mention'd in Scripture, and leave the Reader to judge of the rest. In the time of *Joshua*, when the *Jews* believed that the Sun was carryed about the Earth by a Dyurnal Motion, and that the Earth did not move at all, they fitted the Miracle which happen'd when they fought against the five Kings, according to this their preconceiv'd Opinion, and did not say simply, that the day was longer then ordinary, but that the Sun and Moon stood still, or ceased from motion; which at that time served as a very good Argument to convince the Heathen, who Worshipped the Sun, that their God the Sun, was under the Power of another Deity, who could at his pleasure make him change his Course; and therefore partly out of Religion, and

[147] partly from the Opinion wherewith they were prepossesed, they apprehended and related the thing much otherwise then indeed it was; therefore to explain Miracles and to understand by their relations, how things did truly and really happen, it is necessary to know the Opinions of those, who first reported the Miracles, or left them in Writing, and to distinguish their Opinions, from that which was represented to them by their Sences, else we may confound their Judgments and Opinions, with the Miracle it self: It is likewise necessary to know their Opinions, that we may not confound the things which really happen'd, with the things which were only imaginary, and but Prophetical Revelations; for many things in Scripture are related and believed as things real, which were but representations and meer imaginations; as that God the first and highest of all Beings, descended from Heaven, *Exod. chap. 19. v. 18. Deut. chap. 5. v. 23.* upon Mount *Sinai*, and that the Mountain smoaked because God came down upon it in the midst of Fire: we are likewise told of *Eliahs* going to Heaven in a Fiery Chariot, with Horses of Fire; all which were but representations suted to the Opinions of them, who delivered to us those things for realities; when in truth they were

[148] but meer representations; whoever is but little wiser then the Multitude, knows that God hath neither Right or Left Hand, that he neither resteth nor moveth, that he is comprehensively in no place, but is infinite, and in him are contain'd all perfections. These things I say are known to Men, who judge of things by the perceptions of a pure understanding and not as their Fancy is affected by their outward Sences; as is usual with the Vulgar, who believe God to be Corporeal, and imagining he Exerciseth Kingly Dominion, fancy his Throne to be in Heaven above the Stars, at no great distance from the Earth; to which and the like Opinions many Cases in Scripture are Accommodated; but yet ought not to be thought real by Wise Men. Truly to understand how Miracles happen'd, it concerns us to know the Phrases and Figures of the *Hebrew* Language; for he that is not well acquainted with them, will take many things in Scripture for Miracles, which were never thought so by the Penmen of it; so that he will not only be mistaken in the Things and Miracles that happen'd, but will be likewise ignorant what was the meaning of those by whom the Scripture was Originally Written (for Example.) The Prophet *Zachary chap. 14. v. 7.* speaking of a

[149] future War saith, *but it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord, nor Day nor Night, but it shall come to pass that at the Evening time, it shall be Light*, in which words he

seems to predict a great Miracle; but they signify no more, then that a doubtful Battle should be fought, whereof the Success should be known only to God, but towards Evening the *Jews* should be Victorious. In the like Phrases and Expressions, the Prophets were wont to foretel and write the Victories and overthrows of the Nations, *Isaiah. chap. 13. v. 10.* declareth the destruction of *Babylon* in these words, *the Stars of Heaven and the Constellations thereof shall not give their Light, the Sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the Moon shall not cause her Light to shine*, which no body believes did happen in the destruction of that Empire, nor that which the Prophet adds. *v. 13. therefore will I shake the Heavens and the Earth shall remove out of her place.* In like manner, *Isaiah chap. 48. v. 21. they thirsted not when he led them through the deserts, he caused the Waters to flow out of the Rock, for them he clave the Rock also and the Waters gushed out;* by which words nothing more is meant, then that the *Jews* found Fountains in the deserts, by which they quenched their thirst; for no such Miracles hap-

[150] pen'd, when by the consent of *Cyrus* they returned to *Jerusalem*, many expressions of like Nature, occur in the Scripture, and are only fashions of speaking amongst the *Jewish Nation*; I need instance in no more, but let it be observed, that the *Jews* made use of such Phrases, not only for Ornament to their Language, but also to express their Devotion; and therefore attributed all things to God; so that the Scripture seems to relate nothing but Miracles, even when it speaks of things meerly natural. We are therefore to believe, that when the Scripture saith God hardened the Heart of *Pharaoh*, nothing more was signified, then that *Pharaoh* was very obstinate and disobedient; and when it is said, God opened the Windows of Heaven, nothing more is to be understood, then that there fell abundance of Rain: whoever then will but consider, that many things in Scripture are related very briefly, imperfectly, and without Circumstances, shall find nothing repugnant to natural Reason, but many things which seem very obscure, may with a little Meditation be explain'd and easily understood: so that I think I have sufficiently proved, what I intended: but before I put an end to this Chapter, I have thought fit to intimate, that in speaking

[151] of Miracles, I have taken a course different from that I made use of in treating of Prophecy; for I declared nothing positively concerning Prophecy, but what I could conclude from fundamental Principles revealed in the Scripture; but what I have said concerning Miracles, I have drawn from Principles known by the Light of Nature, which I did designedly, because I could not know wherein Prophecy consisted, nor could I aver any thing of it (it being a meer Theological question exceeding human Capacity) but what I could derive from revealed Principles; so that I was forced to make a short Historical Collection of Prophecy, and from thence to form some Maxims which might instruct me, as far as 'twas possible, in its Nature and Properties: but because that which we inquire concerning Miracles, namely, whether any thing in Nature can happen which is either contrary to its Laws, or doth not follow from them, is a Philosophical Subject, I thought it much better to clear the Question, by making use of Principles known by the Light of Nature, as those that are most obvious. I say I did it purposely, because I can also prove it from fundamental Principles of Scripture, which declareth that the course and order of nature in general, is constant

[152] and immutable *Ps. 148 v. 6. he also establisht them for ever and ever, he hath made a decree which shall not pass,* and *Jerem. chap. 31. v. 35, 36. thus saith the Lord who giveth the Sun for a Light by Day, and the Ordinances of the Moon and the Stars for a Light by Night, which divideth the Sea when the Waves thereof roar; if these Ordinances depart from before me saith the Lord, then the Seed of Israel shall cease also from being a Nation before me for ever:* the

Philosopher in his Book of *Ecclesiastes chap. 1. v. 10.* saith, *is there any thing whereof it may be said, see this is new, it hath been already of old time, which was before us, v. 11.* he saith, *there is no remembrance of former things, neither shall there be any remembrance of things to come with those that come after:* by which words he means, that nothing happens which hath not happen'd before, tho' it be forgotten; in the *3d Chapter v. 11.* he saith that *God hath made every thing beautiful in its time,* and *v. 14.* he saith *whatever God doth, it shall be for ever, nothing can be put to it nor any thing taken from it, v. 15. that which hath been is now, and that which is to be, hath already been,* which clearly declares, that Nature keeps a constant fixed and unchangeable course, that God in all Ages known and unknown, is still the same, that the Laws of Nature are so large

[153] and perfect, nothing can be added to, or taken from them, and lastly that there is nothing new in Miracles, but what seems so to Mans ignorance, these things are expressly declared in Scripture, but 'tis no where said, that any thing happens in Nature, either contrary to its Laws, or not proceeding from them; so that Miracles require Causes and Circumstances, and are not immediately wrought by I know not what Kingly and absolute Empire, which the Vulgar attribute to God; but by his divine Power and Decree, manifested in the Laws and Order of Nature, and that Miracles may be wrought by seducing Impostures; as appears, *Deut. chap. 13.* and *Matth. chap. 24. v. 24.* from whence it manifestly follows, that Miracles were things natural, and therefore (to use *Solomons* expression) are not to be thought new or contrary to Nature, but have as neer an Alliance as is possible, to natural things, which may be easily made out by the Rules I have laid down, drawn from the Scripture: but tho' I say we are taught these things by Scripture, yet I do not mean, that the Scripture delivers them to us as Doctrines necessary to Salvation, but only that the Prophets received them as we do, and therefore 'tis left to every Mans Liberty, to have such an Opinion of

[154] them, as is most likely to incline him most religiously and heartily to serve God, and of this mind was *Josephus*, for he concludes his Second Book of Antiquities with these words; *Neither ought any Man to marvel, at this so wonderful discourse, that thorow the Red Sea a passage should be found, to save so many Persons in times past, and they rude and simple; whether it were done by the Will of God, or that it chanced of it self; since not long time ago God so thinking it good, the Sea of Pamphilia divided it self, to give way to Alexander King of Macedons Souldiers, having no other passage, to destroy the Empire of the Persians, and this all acknowledge, who have Written the Acts of Alexander, and therefore of these things let every one think as he pleaseth.*

* * *

The second Chapter VI transcription given here is from pages 120 through 141 of the second edition of a later translation, by Robert Willis, published by N. Trübner & Co. in London, in 1868. This time the translation was given the title: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus: A Theological and Political Treatise, Showing Under a Series of Heads That Freedom of Thought and of Discussion May Not Only Be Granted With Safety to Religion and the Peace of the State, but Cannot Be Denied Without Danger to Both the Public Peace and True Piety.* The first edition of this work had been published in 1862 (under a rather different title), and Willis created a second after he studied the 1689 translation,

which he had not known about until after the first appeared in print. Chapter VI of the second edition, however, contains only a few small changes to the 1862 version.

[120]

CHAPTER VI.

Of Miracles.

As every science is called divine that is beyond the reach of ordinary intelligence, so are men inclined to see the hand of God in every event or phenomenon whose cause is commonly unknown. The vulgar, in fact, are persuaded that the power and providence of God never appear so manifestly as when something happens which is at variance with use and wont, especially if it interfere at the same time with their advantage or convenience. Nothing, for example, is thought to prove the existence of God so clearly as some presumed interruption of the regular course of nature; and it is on this account that they who seek to explain unusual events and phenomena by natural causes are very commonly regarded as guilty of calling in question the being, or at all events the providence, of God. So long as nature proceeds in its even and accustomed order, the vulgar think that God is doing nothing; and, on the other hand, they fancy that the powers of nature are suspended when God interferes. In this way two powers are imagined, distinct from one another, the Power of God and the Power of Nature, which last, however, is presumed to be influenced and ordered in a certain way by God; or, as is generally believed at the present time, which is created by God. But what is understood precisely by these two powers, God and Nature, is not ex-

[121] plained; unless it be that God is conceived as a king and sovereign ruler, whilst Nature is imagined as a special subordinate force. The vulgar, therefore, give the title of a miracle or work of God to every extraordinary natural event; and partly from devotional feeling, partly from a spirit of opposition to those who cultivate natural science, they care not to inquire into the causes of phenomena, and will listen to nothing but that of which they are really most ignorant, and for which they therefore entertain the highest admiration. Now this mainly proceeds from men in general being without other reasons for adoring God, and referring all that happens to his will and pleasure, than by supposing natural causes abrogated, and the order of nature arbitrarily suspended. They only bow to the power of God, in short, when they believe the power of nature to be subjugated as it were by God.

When we inquire into the origin of such prejudices, we have to look as far back as the times of the primitive Jews. In order to convince the heathen nations about them, worshippers of visible deities, the sun, moon, stars, earth, air, water, &c., that such gods were weak and inconstant, and under the dominion of an invisible God, whom they adored, they narrated many wonderful miracles he had wrought; and, further, endeavoured to show that the whole of nature was ruled by him for their peculiar advantage. The system thus inaugurated laid such hold on the minds of men, that even to the present day each tribe or nation has not ceased from imagining miracles favourable to the conclusion that it was more acceptable to God than all the rest of mankind, and was, in fact, the final cause for which God at first created, and still continues to uphold, the world. Such vulgar folly arises from the circumstance that men in general have no sound conception either of God or of nature; that they confound the desires and imaginations of man

with the desires of the Almighty, and figure nature in such small proportions as to believe that man is its principal part. But it is enough merely

[122] to hint at the opinions and prejudices of the vulgar concerning nature and miracles, and I therefore proceed to the consideration of the four principles which I here propose to myself to demonstrate, and in the following order: 1st, I shall begin by showing that nothing happens contrary to the order of nature, and that this order subsists without pause or interruption, eternal and unchangeable; I shall at the same time take occasion to explain what is to be understood by a miracle. 2nd, I shall prove that miracles cannot make known to us the essence and existence of God, nor consequently his providence, these great truths being so much better illustrated and proclaimed by the regular and invariable order of nature. 3rd, I shall prove by various examples, taken from Holy Writ, that Scripture, in speaking of the decrees and the will of God, and consequently of his providence, means nothing more than the order of nature itself, which necessarily results from his eternal laws. Fourthly and lastly, I shall discuss the proper manner of interpreting the miracles of Scripture, and insist on the main points which seem to require consideration in the narratives we have of these miracles. Such are the principal heads that form the argument of the present chapter; and they have an especial bearing upon the whole scope and purpose of this work.

1. With regard to my first position, it were almost enough to refer to my fourth chapter, on Divine Law, in which I have demonstrated that all that God wills or resolves involves the conception of eternal truth and eternal necessity. The intelligence of God not being conceivable as distinct from his will, as I have shown above, to say that God thinks or that God wills is to affirm one and the same thing. Consequently, the same necessity, in virtue of which it follows from the nature and perfection of God that he thinks a certain thing such as it is, this same necessity, I say, implies that God wills the thing such as it is. But as nothing is absolutely true save by divine decree alone, it is evident that the universal laws of nature are the very decrees of God, which result necessarily from the perfection of the

[123] Divine nature. If, therefore, anything happened in nature at large repugnant to its universal laws, this would be equally and necessarily repugnant to the decrees and intelligence of God; so that any one who maintained that God acted in opposition to the laws of nature would at the same time be forced to maintain that God acted in opposition to his proper nature, an idea than which nothing can be imagined more absurd. I might show the same thing, or strengthen what I have just said, by referring to the truth, that the power of nature is in fact the Divine Power; Divine Power is the very essence of God himself. But this I pass by for the present. Nothing, then, happens in nature* (*By nature here do not understand the material universe only, and its affections, but besides the matter an infinity of other things.) which is in contradiction with its universal laws. Nor this only; nothing happens which is not in accordance with these laws, or does not follow from them: for whatever is, and whatever happens, is and happens by the will and eternal decree of God; that is, as has been already shown, whatever happens does so according to rules and laws which involve eternal truth and necessity. Nature consequently always observes laws, although all of these are not known to us, which involve eternal truth and necessity, and thus preserves a fixed and immutable course. Nor will sound reason ever persuade us to ascribe a limited power and efficacy to nature, and to conceive its laws as operative in a certain restricted sense only, and not universally; for, since the power and efficacy of nature are the power and efficacy of God, and the laws of nature are the ordinances of God himself, we must needs believe that the power of nature is infinite, and its laws of such extent that they reach and pervade all that is comprehended by the

divine intelligence. Were they not so, what else could be inferred than that God had made nature so impotent, and given it laws and statutes so barren, that he is forced frequently to intervene anew if he would have these laws continued, and the frame of things upheld in conformity with his wishes,—a doctrine as remote from reason as can well be conceived.

[124] From these premises, therefore, viz. that nothing happens in nature which does not follow from its laws; that these laws extend to all which enters into the divine mind; and, lastly, that nature proceeds in a fixed and changeless course; it follows most obviously that the word miracle can only be understood in relation to the opinions of mankind, and signifies nothing more than an event, a phenomenon, the cause of which cannot be explained by another familiar instance, or, in any case, which the narrator is unable to explain. I might say, indeed, that a miracle was that the cause of which cannot be explained by our natural understanding from the known principles of natural things. But as miracles were calculated for the vulgar apprehension, which ignores all knowledge of the principles of natural things, it is certain that the ancients regarded as a miracle that which they could not explain in the way in which they were wont to account for natural things, viz. by recurring to their memory for another similar thing which they were accustomed to regard without wonder; for the vulgar always think they understand a thing when they have ceased to marvel at it. The ancients, therefore, and almost all men, even to the present time, have had no other standard of a miracle but this; and there can be no question but that many things are related in Scripture as miracles which are readily to be explained on the known principles of natural things, as has been already suggested in Chapter II., when we spoke of the sun standing still in the time of Joshua, and retrograding in the days of Ahaz, of which I shall have more to say when I come to speak of the explanation of miracles, a subject which I promised to discuss in this chapter. But it is time I passed on to my second proposition, which was to show that from miracles we can neither obtain a knowledge of the existence nor of the providence of God; on the contrary, that these are much better elicited from the eternal and changeless order of nature.

2. The existence of God not being obvious of itself,* (*We doubt of the existence of God, and consequently of all things, so long as [125] we have only a confused, instead of a clear and distinct, idea of God. Just as he who does not know the nature of the triangle does not know that the sum of its angles is equal to two rectangles; in the same way, he who only conceives the Divine nature in a confused manner does not see that *to exist* belongs to the nature of God. Now, to conceive the Divine nature in a clear and distinct manner, it is necessary to attend to a certain number of extremely simple notions, which are called common notions, and with their assistance to connect the conceptions which we form of the attributes of the Supreme. Then only for the first time does it become evident to us that God exists necessarily; that he is omnipresent, that all we conceive envelopes the nature of God, and is conceived by its means; lastly, that all our adequate ideas are true. On this point the reader is referred to the prolegomena of my Tractate, entitled, “Principia philosophiae Cartesianae more Geometrica demonstrata.”) it

[125] must necessarily be inferred from ideas, the truth of which is so unquestionable that no power can be assigned or even imagined adequate to shake them. From the moment we conclude from these ideas that God exists, they ought to present themselves to the mind as beyond the sphere of doubt; for could we imagine that these notions could be changed by any power whatsoever, then should we doubt of their truth, and consequently of our conclusion as to the existence of God also, the effect of which would be that we should no longer feel certain of anything. And then we really know of nothing that agrees with nature or differs from it, save that which we have shown to agree with or to differ from these principles; wherefore, could we conceive that aught could happen in nature from any power (whatever this might be) which was

repugnant to nature, this would also be repugnant to these primary notions, and so would have to be rejected as absurd; or else we should be forced to doubt of first notions (as we have just said), and consequently of God and of all conceptions whatsoever. Miracles, therefore, conceiving these as events contravening the established order of nature, are so far from proving to us the existence of God, that they would actually lead us to call it in question, seeing that without them we can be absolutely certain of the existence of God, as we truly are when we know that all things in nature observe a definite and unchanging course.

But suppose it is said that a miracle is that which cannot

[126] be explained by natural causes; this may be understood in two ways: either that it has natural causes which cannot be investigated by the human understanding, or that it acknowledges no cause save God, or the will of God. But as all that happens, also happens by the sole will and power of God, it were then necessary to say that a miracle either owned natural causes, or if it did not, that it was inexplicable by any cause; in other words, that it was something which it surpassed the human capacity to understand. But of anything in general, and of the particular thing in question, viz. the miracle, which surpasses our powers of comprehension, nothing whatever can be known. For that which we clearly and distinctly understand must become known to us either of itself, or by something else which of itself is clearly and distinctly understood. Wherefore, from a miracle, as an incident surpassing our powers of comprehension, we cannot understand anything, either of the essence or existence or any other quality of God or nature; on the contrary, when we know that all things are determined and sanctioned by God, that the operations of nature follow from the essence of God, and that the laws of nature are eternal decrees and volitions of God, we conclude unconditionally that we know God and his holy will by so much the better as we have a better knowledge, a clearer comprehension, of natural things,—how they depend on God as their first cause, and how they exist and act according to eternal, changeless laws ordained by him. Wherefore, as regards our understanding, those events which we clearly and distinctly comprehend, are with much better right entitled works of God, and referred to his will, than those which are wholly unintelligible to us, although they strongly seize upon our imagination and wrap us in amazement; inasmuch as those works of nature only which we clearly and distinctly apprehend render our knowledge of God truly sublime, and point to his will and decrees with the greatest clearness. They therefore plainly trifle who, when they do not know a thing, fall back upon the will of God—a most ridiculous way of pro-

[127] fessing or excusing ignorance. Moreover, whatever other inference may be drawn from miracles, nothing, at all events, can be concluded from them in regard to the existence of God; for, inasmuch as a miracle is a limited act, and never expresses more than a certain limited power, it is certain that we can never from such an effect infer the existence of a cause whose power is infinite; we could at the most conceive a cause, the power of which was relatively greater. I say at the most, for a certain event might happen from many causes concurring to produce it, of which the immediate cause should be of less potency than the mass of concurring causes, though greater than that of each of them severally. But the laws of nature (as already shown), reaching to infinity, and being conceived by us as a kind of eternity, and nature in virtue of them proceeding in a certain and immutable order, they so far declare to us in an assured manner the Infinity, the Eternity, and the Unchangeable nature of God.

Let us conclude, therefore, that we can know nothing by miracles of the existence and providence of God; on the contrary, that these attributes are far better inferred from the regular and

unchanging order of nature. In this conclusion I of course speak of miracles, as understanding by them nothing more than events which surpass, or are believed to surpass, the common comprehension of mankind. For if miracles be understood as interruptions or abrogations of the order of nature, or as subversive of its laws, not only could they not give us any knowledge of God, but, on the contrary, they would destroy that which we naturally have, and would induce doubt both of the existence of God and of everything else. Nor do I here recognize any difference between a phenomenon or event *contrary* to nature, and one *beyond* nature, a phrase by which some understand a phenomenon not repugnant to, but not producible by, nature; because as a miracle takes place not beyond but in nature, if it be held to be above nature, it must needs interrupt the order of nature, which we otherwise conceive to be, by the decrees of God, fixed, immutable, eternal. Did aught consequently

[128] take place in nature which did not follow from its everlasting laws, it would necessarily contravene the order which God has established in nature by the universal laws he has decreed for its government, and would thus subvert nature and its laws, and consequently lead to general scepticism and atheism.

From these views and reasonings I think I have sufficiently established my second proposition, and believe we may safely conclude anew that a miracle, whether contrary to nature or above nature, is a sheer absurdity; and therefore that by a miracle in Holy Writ we are to understand nothing more than a natural phenomenon which surpasses, or is believed to surpass, human powers of comprehension.

Before proceeding to my third position, viz. that we cannot know God from miracles, I gladly take occasion to confirm the above conclusions by the authority of Scripture, which, although nowhere openly teaching so much, nevertheless gives it clearly enough to be understood in many passages. Thus Moses teaches (Deut. xiii.) that a false prophet, although he work miracles, is yet to be put to death: "If there arise among you a prophet . . . and giveth thee a sign or wonder, and the sign or wonder come to pass, saying, Let us go after other gods, . . . thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet; for the Lord your God proveth you, . . . and that prophet shall be put to death." From this it plainly appears that wonders or signs could be worked by false prophets, and that men, unless duly imbued with a true knowledge and love of God, could be led with like facility under the guidance of miracles to worship false gods as to adore the true and only God. For in the same passage these words are added; "For Jehovah, your God, tempts you, that he may know whether you love him with all your heart and all your mind." And then, of what avail did miracles prove in giving the children of Israel reasonable ideas of God? When they had persuaded themselves that they were forsaken by Moses, they demanded visible gods from Aaron, and, oh shame! a calf was their idea of God; and this in spite of the multitude of signs and

[129] wonders they had seen. Asaph, the psalmist, too, although he had heard of so many miracles, doubted nevertheless of the providence of God, and had almost strayed from the right way, had he not at length acquired better notions of that wherein true happiness consists (vide Psalm xxxvii.). Solomon also, in the times when the Jewish nation was at the height of its prosperity, suspects that all things happen by chance (vide Eccles. iii. 19, 20, 21, and ix. 2, 3, *et seq.*). Lastly, almost all the prophets exhibit a very confused idea of God's providence, and are evidently at a loss to make the order of nature and the events that happen in the world agree with such ideas as they entertained. Nevertheless, the matter has always presented itself clearly enough to the philosopher who strives to comprehend it, not by means of miracles, but by forming clear

conceptions of God and nature; to the philosopher who conceives true happiness to consist in virtue and peace of mind alone, and who studies to obey nature, not to make nature bend to him; inasmuch as he knows for certain that God governs nature in the way his universal laws compel, not in the manner the particular laws of man would require, and that thus God has regard, not to the human kind alone, but to the fabric of the world at large. It is therefore certainly proved from Scripture itself that miracles give no true knowledge either of God or of his eternal providence.

There is one thing, however, constantly repeated in the Scriptures, viz. that God showed signs and wonders, or wrought miracles, in order that he might become known to the Jewish people. Thus in Exodus (x. 2) we read that God deceived the Egyptians, and gave signs of himself to the children of Israel, that they might know he was the Lord. But it does not therefore follow that miracles were the means by which God taught this truth; it only shows that the Jews held opinions which led them to be readily persuaded by signs and portents; for in our second chapter we have satisfactorily shown that prophetic reasons, or reasons formed from revelation, are not formed from

[130] universal and common notions, but from the preconceptions and opinions, however absurd, of those to whom the matter was revealed, or whom the Holy Spirit desired to convince; a position which we have illustrated by many quotations, and also by the testimony of the Apostle Paul, who tells us himself that he was Greek with the Greeks and Jew with the Jews. Now although these miracles might satisfy Egyptians and Jews, in appealing to their prejudices, they could not give any true notion or knowledge of God; they could only lead to the admission that there was a God more powerful than anything known to them; and, lastly, that the Jews, with whom at this time all had gone most prosperously, were the especial objects of his care and protection, but not that God really cared for and protected all mankind alike; for this truth philosophy alone could teach. The Jews, consequently, and all who know nothing of the providence of God save from dissimilar states of human affairs and the unequal fortunes of men, have persuaded themselves that they were more acceptable to the Supreme Being than any other people, although they did not in reality surpass other nations in aught that constitutes true excellence, as we have shown at length in our third chapter.

3. I proceed to prove from Scripture that the decrees and commandments of God, and consequently his providence, are nothing more than the order of nature; that is to say, when Scripture declares this and that to have been done by God, or to be the will of God, nothing is to be understood but that the act was in accordance with the laws and order of nature, and not, as the vulgar believe, that nature for a season had ceased to act, or that its order had for a certain time been subverted. Scripture, I here observe, never directly teaches anything that does not bear immediately on its doctrines; for its purpose, as I have shown in connection with the divine law, is not to teach by natural causes, nor by merely speculative considerations. Thus, in the First Book of Samuel (ix. 15, 16) we are informed that God revealed to Samuel that he should send Saul to him; yet God did not

[131] send Saul to Samuel in the way in which men are wont to send expressly one to another, for the visit of Saul to Samuel arose out of concurrent circumstances, thus—Saul was in search of the asses he had lost, as narrated in the preceding chapter of the book, and failing to find them, and even thinking of returning home without them, on the suggestion of his servant he sought out Samuel the seer, that he might inquire of him where he should discover his strayed cattle; from no part of the whole narrative does it appear that Saul received any special command from God to

visit Samuel. In Psalm cv. 25 it is said that God changed the hearts of the Egyptians, so that they hated the children of Israel; but this was obviously a natural incident, as appears from Exodus i., where we find very sufficient reasons why the Egyptians oppressed the Jews and reduced them to slavery.* (*And the children of Israel multiplied, and waxed exceedingly mighty; and there arose a new king over Egypt, and he said, “The children of Israel are more and mightier than we: let us deal wisely with them, lest they join unto our enemies and fight against us,” &c.—*Ed.*) In Genesis ix. 13 God informs Noah that he would show himself in the clouds, and set his bow there, which is but another way of expressing the natural law by which the rays of the sun suffer refraction when they fall upon drops of water. In Psalm cxlvii. 18 the natural action of wind and heat by which hoar-frost and snow are melted is spoken of as the word of God, and in ver. 15 the wind and the cold are entitled the commandment and word of the Lord. In Psalm civ. 4, again, wind and fire are called the angels or messengers, and ministers of God; indeed, very many expressions of the same kind are met with in Scripture, all of which proclaim most distinctly that the words commandment, decree, and word of God, are often nothing more than expressions for the agency and order of nature itself. Wherefore there is no reason to doubt that everything related in Scripture happened naturally, though it is always referred immediately to God, because it is not the business of Holy Writ to teach by reference to natural

[132] causes, but only to narrate events in such a way as shall most powerfully strike the imagination, constant recourse being had to the manner and style which best serve to arouse wonder, and consequently to impress the minds of the many with devotional sentiments.

If, therefore, some things be found in Scripture for which we can assign no reason, and which moreover seem to have happened contrary to the usual course of nature, this ought really to be no hindrance to us; we are still by all means to believe that what really happened happened naturally. The propriety of this conclusion is confirmed by the fact that special circumstances, although not always particularly dwelt on, are often connected with miracles, especially when the account of them is sung in poetic strains, which clearly proclaim that they were the effect of natural causes. For instance, when Moses wished the Egyptians to be infected with blotches and blains, he cast hot ashes into the air (Exod. ix. 10); the locusts also came upon the land through a natural command of God, namely, on the wings of an east wind which blew day and night; and they ceased their ravages or disappeared by the agency of a violent westerly gale (Exod. x. 14, 19).. In the same way, by the command of God, or by means of a strong east wind which blew all night, a way was opened for the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea (Exod. xiv. 21). Elisha, also, when he set about resuscitating the lad who was thought to be dead, bent over him repeatedly, until he had restored warmth to the child [and perhaps inflated his lungs], who then and at length opened his eyes* (* “And he (Elisha) lay upon the child, and *put his mouth to his mouth*, and the flesh of the child waxed warm,” &c —*Ed.*) (vide 2 Kings iv. 34, 35). So also in the Gospel according to John (ix.) we find certain circumstances related as preparatives to the healing of the blind man by Christ; and, indeed, through the whole of the Scriptures many things of the same kind occur, which all proclaim that miracles require something more than the mere mandate, as it is called, of God. Wherefore, we are to

[133] believe that, although the circumstances and the natural causes of miracles are not always fully related, nevertheless that none ever happened without their concurrence. This is very strikingly illustrated by what we find in Exodus (xiv. 27), where the whole statement is, that Moses “stretched forth his hand, and the waters of the sea returned to their strength in the morning.” Here there is no mention of a violent wind as the agent of the phenomenon: but in the

song of Moses (ib. xv. 10) we find these words: “Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea covered them,” the wind of God here being a very strong wind; but the agency is omitted in the narrative in order that the wonder might appear the more striking.

But some may perhaps insist that in Scripture a multitude of things can be pointed out which are altogether inexplicable by natural causes, as, for instance, that the wickedness or the piety and prayers of man may be the cause of rain and inundation, and of the fertility or barrenness of the earth; that faith can cure the blind, make the sick whole, &c. But I think that I have already sufficiently replied to this objection; for I have shown that the purpose of Scripture is never to explain things by their immediate causes, but only to present them in a sequence, and in a style calculated to arouse the devotional feelings of the multitude especially; and this is the reason why God and things in general are there often spoken of in what without irreverence may be styled a somewhat objectionable manner, the purpose aimed at being not to convince the reason, but to engage and influence the imagination. Suppose, for example, that the fall of a great empire were to be narrated in the sober style usual with historical and political writers, the people would be little moved by it; but a different effect would be produced if all were poetically depicted and referred to the immediate agency of God, as is most commonly done in Scripture. When the ground is said to become barren in consequence of the wickedness of mankind, therefore, or the blind are restored to sight through faith, such statements

[134] ought not to move us more than when we read that because of the sins of men God is angry or sorrowful, or repents him of the good he had promised and done, or is reminded of a promise he had made by a sign in the heavens, and very many things of the same sort, which are either mere poetical expressions, or narratives in conformity with the opinions and prejudices of the writer. Let us unhesitatingly conclude, then, that whatever of truth we find in the Scripture narratives of events, these uniformly came to pass in accordance with the laws of nature which necessarily govern all things; and when we meet with any incident there which may be demonstrated as opposed to the laws of nature, or which can in no way be reconciled with them, we may feel assured that it has been added to the sacred Scriptures by some sacrilegious hand; for whatever is against nature is against reason [and against God], and what is against reason is absurd, and therefore to be scouted.

4. I have now only to make a few remarks on the interpretation of miracles; or, rather, to resume the heads of what I have just said, and to illustrate them by one or two examples. What makes it the more necessary to do so is lest any one, by interpreting a certain miracle amiss, should rashly suspect that he had found something in Scripture which was repugnant to natural reason.

It is very seldom that men relate an event simply as it happened; that they mingle nothing of their own fancies or opinions with the narrative. When they see or hear anything new, indeed, unless especially on their guard against preconceived opinions, they mostly even perceive things quite otherwise than as they are in fact, especially if the matter in question is beyond the capacity of the listener or narrator, and still more if it interferes in any way with his interests or affections. From this it comes that in their Chronicles and Histories men are much more apt to give their own views and opinions than to narrate events as they actually happened; and so it turns out that the same incident related by two persons of dissimilar views often appears as if two dif-

[135] ferent events were spoken of. It is, therefore, upon occasion not very difficult from the style and statements of a narrative to discover the opinions of the chronicler or historian. I could

confirm these reflections by quotations from various philosophers, even, who have written the history of nature, as well as from the chroniclers of historical events; but I think this superfluous, and shall content myself with citing a single instance from Scripture, leaving the rest to the judgment and research of the reader. In the time of Joshua the Jews believed, as the vulgar do at the present time, that the sun was in motion and the earth at rest. They did not fail accordingly to accommodate to this opinion the account of the miracle which befell in the great battle against the five kings; for they have not said simply that the day on which the battle took place seemed longer than usual, but that the sun and moon stood still in their course, ceased from their motions. Now this manner of stating the event was obviously well calculated to impress the minds of the heathen of those times who worshipped the sun, with the conviction that this luminary was under the control of another more powerful divinity, at whose nod it could be made to pause in its course against all former experience. Partly on religious grounds, therefore, partly from preconceived opinions, the Jews apprehended and related the event of the long day during the battle with the five kings very differently from the way in which it occurred in fact.

To interpret the miracles of Scripture consequently, and to understand them from the narratives, it is absolutely necessary to be informed of the opinions of those who first witnessed or narrated them, and also of those who have left us an account of them in writing, and to make a cardinal distinction between the event in itself and the impression it may have produced on the minds of those who witnessed it. Without this precaution we should certainly confound the opinions and prejudices of witnesses and historians with events in themselves. Nor were this all, we should still be liable to confound things that actually transpired with things

[136] imaginary, or that were mere prophetic representations conceived in dreams and visions. For in Scripture many things are narrated as realities, things which were indeed believed to be realities, which nevertheless were mere fanciful or imaginative representations; as, for example, when it is said that God, the Being of beings, “came down from heaven” (Exod. xix. 28, and Deut. v. 28), and that Mount Sinai “smoked because God descended upon it enveloped in fire;” “that Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses,” &c. These are all but ideal representations, in conformity with the opinions of those who have transmitted them to us, and as they themselves received them, viz. as sober accounts of actual events. Every one, but a little raised above vulgar notions, is aware that God has neither right nor left, is neither in motion nor at rest, nor in one place more than another, but that he is absolutely infinite, and includes all perfections in himself. They, I say, know these things who judge after the conceptions of pure intelligence, and not as imagination influenced by external sense leads us to conclude, which the vulgar always do when they picture God to themselves as corporeal, as surrounded by regal pomp and state, with his throne established in the heaven of heavens above the stars, the distance of which from the earth is not conceived to be extremely great. To these and similar opinions many narratives in Scripture are plainly adapted, and are not to be accepted by the philosophical as accounts of things as they are in fact, or that actually occurred.

Another important point in the review of the Scripture miracles is this, that the figurative language of the Hebrews—their tropes and poetical expressions—be well understood; for whosoever loses sight of these will inevitably fasten many miracles upon Scripture which its writers never even imagined, and so not only mistake the manner in which signs and wonders actually occurred, but also proclaim his own ignorance of the sacred text. By way of example let us turn to Zechariah (xiv. 7). Speaking of the event of a certain

[137] approaching war, the prophet expresses himself thus, "It shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord, not day nor night; but at even time it shall be light." These words seem to involve a great miracle or mystery; and yet they signify nothing more than this,—that the battle should be doubtful through the whole of the day, its issue being only known to God, but that in the evening the victory would be won. It is in such enigmatical language indeed that the prophets were wont to speak and to write of the victories and disasters of nations. Isaiah, for instance, depicting the desolation of Babylon (xiii.), makes use of these words, "The stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine." Now, I do not suppose any one imagines that all this happened literally when the Babylonian empire fell, any more than that which the prophet immediately adds, "For I will make the heavens to tremble, and remove the earth out of her place." In like manner the same prophet (xlviii.), desiring to make it known to the Jews that they should assuredly return to Jerusalem from Babylon and not suffer from thirst on their journey, says, "And they thirsted not when he led them through the deserts; he caused the waters to flow out of the rocks for them; he clave the rock and the waters gushed out." The meaning of which is simply that the Jews found springs in the desert to slake their thirst—and springs do well-up in the desert at intervals;—for when the Jews returned to Jerusalem with the consent of Cyrus, it is certain that no such miracle occurred literally as that which the prophet here describes. Very many things of the same kind are met with in the sacred writings,—mere modes of expression in use among the Jews, which I do not think it necessary to specify more in detail. I remark generally that the Hebrews were wont not only to embroider their statements with flowery or poetical language, but, further, that they almost always used devout expressions. This is the reason why in Scripture we sometimes find the expression *bless* God for *curse* God, as in

[138] 1 Kings xxi. 10, and Job ii. 9.* (*This is as Spinoza has it, and as we presume it is in the original Hebrew, but in the margin of the Codex opposite the word *bless* stands the Variorum reading *curse* or *blaspheme*; and as in our English version we always have the marginal variation substituted for the textual word, so we have *blaspheme* in Kings and *curse* in Job. Vide some interesting observations of the Author on the marginal notes of the Hebrew codices in Chapter ix.—*Ed.*) For the same reason the Jews referred everything to God, so that Scripture in parts seems to narrate nothing but miracles, even when speaking of the most natural occurrences. Examples of this system have been given in sufficient number above. We are to conclude therefore, when we find it said that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, that nothing more is implied than that Pharaoh was firm and uncomplying; and when it is stated that God opened the windows of heaven, we are only to understand that a great deal of rain fell, and so on. Whoever regards these passages with an unbiassed mind, and remembers that many things are spoken of in the curtest terms, and without any of the accompanying circumstances, will find almost nothing in Scripture which can be shown to be repugnant to natural reason; and on the contrary, much which, although at the first blush appearing obscure, with a little reflection comes to be readily enough interpreted and understood.

I have thus, I think, said all I had to say on the subject of miracles. But before bringing this chapter to a close, I find one thing which I think ought to be mentioned, namely, that in discussing the subject of miracles I have proceeded otherwise than when treating of Prophecy. Of Prophecy I affirm nothing but what I could deduce from grounds revealed in Scripture; but of miracles I derive the chief points insisted on from principles cognizable by the natural understanding; and this I do advisedly; because, of prophecy, as its statements go beyond the scope of our faculties and the question becomes purely theological, I could affirm, as I could know, nothing except from the revelations made. Here, consequently, I was forced to collate the

prophecies, and from them to form certain dogmatic conclusions, which gave me a glimpse, in as far as this was to be had, of the nature

[139] and qualities of prophecy in general. But in regard to miracles, as the subject of our present inquiry is plainly philosophical, viz. whether we can admit the occurrence of anything in nature subversive of its laws, or that is not the effect of these laws, I required to do nothing of the kind; I have rather and intentionally striven to elucidate the subject upon principles familiarly known, and on grounds accessible to our natural understanding; I say I have taken this course of set purpose, for I could readily have explained miracle on a dogmatic basis entirely derived from Scripture. And that this may more plainly appear, I shall here yet further show that Scripture in several places affirms of nature in general that its course is fixed and unchangeable. In the 148th Psalm, for example (ver. 6), in Jeremiah (xxx. 35, 36), and in Solomon (Ecclesiastes i. 10), it is clearly declared that there is nothing new under the sun. The sage, indeed, in further illustration of this truth (Eccles. i. 10, 11), proceeds to say that although occasionally something happens which seems new, still it is not new, "It hath been already of old time which was before us, whereof there is no remembrance, neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after." Again, in chapter iii. 11, he says that "God hath made everything beautiful in his time," and immediately after he adds (ver. 14), "I know that whatsoever God doeth it shall be for ever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it;" all of which teaches most distinctly that the order of nature is fixed and immutable, that God was the same in all times, known and unknown to us, and that the laws of nature are so perfect and so fruitful that nothing can be added to, as nothing can be taken from, them, and, lastly, that miracles are only seen as something new because of the ignorance of man. These things then are expressly taught in the sacred Scriptures; but nowhere do they teach that anything happens in nature which contravenes its laws, or which might not follow from their agency; such views are therefore on no account to be connected with Scripture. Add to all this that miracles require causes and

[140] circumstances (as has been already shown), and do not proceed from that royal authority, to me inscrutable, which the vulgar connect with God, but from divine authority and decree; that is to say (as I have also made manifest out of Scripture), from the laws of nature and its unchanging order; and, finally, that miracles could also be performed by impostors, as we have it expressly declared in Deuteronomy (xiii.) and in Matthew (xxiv.). From all this it follows most obviously that [the events styled] miracles have been natural occurrences, and are therefore to be so explained as neither to appear new things, to use the words of Solomon, nor as things opposed to nature, but in such a manner, if this may in any wise be done, as shall assimilate them with natural things. It is with a view to assist every one in this course that I have brought together the few rules, derived exclusively from Scripture, which I have given for the study and interpretation of miracles. And here I beg to be allowed to say, that when I declare the teaching of Scripture in regard to miracles to be as I have stated it, I would not be understood as meaning to say that such things are there taught as principles needful to salvation, but only that the prophets regarded miracles in the same manner as we do; consequently, that it is permitted to every one to think on this subject in that way which shall seem to him best calculated to raise his mind to the worship of God, and lead him to embrace the principles of true religion with his whole heart and spirit. Such, in fact, was the view of Josephus, who ends the Second Book of his Antiquities in these words:

"The word miracle ought not to make us incredulous; why should not the men of old be believed who tell us of a path of safety opened through the sea, whether revealed to them by the will of

God or followed in the natural course of things? Is it not confidently related by those who have written the life and deeds of Alexander that the Sea of Pamphylia opened a way, when there was no other left, for the King of Macedonia and those who were with him, when God willed to make use of this great commander to overthrow the

[141] Persian Empire? Of these things, therefore (miracles), every one is to be left free to think as he pleases.” Such are the words of Josephus, and his opinion of the necessity of belief in miracles.

If the reader will go on to read Mr Hume’s masterly Essay on the subject here discussed, he will, however well disposed to be credulous, feel himself forced for ever to abandon all belief in miracles. The different lines of argument pursued by Spinoza and by Hume severally supplement each other, and seem to leave nothing more to be said on the subject. Miracles indeed have long disappeared from the world of Science; they only linger now among the uneducated—still, alas, in the only proper sense of the term, a very numerous body in the world! The uselessness of miracle as a means to any good end is as old as the Book of Genesis: “If there come a prophet among you and he *do signs and wonders*, if he say: Let us go after other gods,—that prophet shall be put to death.” And to come nearer the present age of the world, we ask what matters it to us whether Christ walked on the Lake of Galilee or not? we are not influenced in our life and conversation by our belief or unbelief in the report of such an unnatural incident. But it is of the last moment to us, and to mankind in all time to come, that we have the example of our Lord’s blessed life, the prayer he taught his disciples, and the sermon he spoke on the mount.—*Ed.* [[Willis]]

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