How Shall We Deal with the Miracles of the Gospels?

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WHAT IS a miracle? That well-known authority, Webster's Dictionary, defines a miracle as "an event or effect in the physical world beyond or out of the ordinary course of things, deviating from the known laws of nature, or transcending our knowledge of these laws; an extraordinary, anomalous, or abnormal event brought about by superhuman agency as a manifestation of its power, or for the purpose of revealing or manifesting spiritual force." Similarly, J. A. MacCulloch, in the "Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics" states that a miracle is "an occasional evidence of direct divine power in an action striking and unusual, yet by its beneficence pointing to the goodness of God." This definition, it would seem, provides too limited a view, for it excludes certain miracles, such as the cursing of the fig tree by Jesus or the punitive deaths of Ananias and Sapphira as described in Acts. Garvie, in the 14th edition of the "Encyclopedia Britannica," states that a miracle is "anything wonderful, beyond human power, and deviating from the common action of nature, a supernatural event." In the newly-published "Encyclopedia of Religion," Ferm says that the term refers "to an event involving the upsetting of natural laws or the intrusion of the supernatural into the realm of the natural." More simply, G. B. Smith in the "Dictionary of Religion and Ethics" writes that miracles are "events inexplicable by the operation of natural forces and thereby regarded as manifestations of special divine activity." Despite certain variations, these definitions are basically the same. Moreover, although some of the authorities may not have intended this, they assume the possibility of miracles, if they do not accept it. For the purposes of this paper the definition of G. B. Smith will be followed, but amended to read: "miracles are **alleged** or **purported** events inexplicable by the operation of natural forces and thereby regarded as manifestations of special divine activity."

With this as a working definition, let us raise the question "What are we going to do with the miracles of the Gospels?" In view of the days in which we are living, in which an increasing number of people are adopting a scientific world view, it may be that this is a gratuitous question. Indeed, in his excellent book, "The Search for the Real Jesus," McCown states: "In principle the problems . . . . **of the miraculous** have been solved." This assertion, however, is much too optimistic; for a survey of recent studies of the gospels and the life and teachings of Jesus shows that modern scholars entertain a variety of views concerning the gospel miracles. Few, as a matter of record, reject them in their entirety, whereas a surprisingly large number accept them as based on fact to a greater or lesser degree.

One view, still widely held, is that the miracles actually occurred as they are described in the gospels, and are to be accepted as the work of the divine Son of God who possessed supernatural power over nature, over the forces of evil, and over death itself. For example, Alan Richardson, in a recent book, "The Miracle Stories of the Gospels," in saying that we must answer either "Yes" or "No" to the question, "Did the miracles recorded in the gospels actually happen?" admits that if we relied on

reason alone we would reject them as historic events, but if we rely on faith we will accept them. He prefers to rely on faith, as the following quotation will show:

> Thus the answer to the question, Did the miracles happen? is always a **personal** answer. It is not the judgment of an historian **qua** scientific investigator, or the verdict of a school of theologians, or the pronouncement of an authoritarian council of churchmen. It is the "Yes" of faith to the challenge which confronts us in the New Testament presentation of Christ —the only Christ we can know. When we say "Yes" to the question about Christ, we are asserting the apostolic claim that in him was the power of God which was from the beginning made manifest and was active for our salvation "under Pontius Pilate." The present writer can do no more than testify to his conviction that in Christ the power of God was indeed revealed: the miracles **did** happen.

The disturbing feature of this book is not that Richardson has acknowledged that he has permitted faith to triumph over reason in his evaluation of the miracles; far more alarming is the general acclaim accorded his study as one of the best of the current treatments of the problem. One man's denial of reason is incidental; but when he is accepted by a wide group of readers there are grounds for great concern.

A somewhat different view is presented by the noted philosopher, Rudolf Otto, in his book on Jesus which has been translated into English under the title, "The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man." While he admits that the gospel accounts of the miracles have been subjected to certain hagiographical elaborations, nevertheless he accepts them as basically historic. According to his theory, Jesus was primarily charismatic in his person, and as a result had the power to perform miracles. But let Otto speak for himself:

> The Kingdom of God, as already at hand, is dynamis, the inbreaking miraculous power of the transcendent. As such, it is operative in the exorcistic dynamis of its messenger, and equally in the exousia and the charis of its preaching. He himself is charisma. The messenger is not only preacher and announcer of this kingdom, but is an integral part of the inbreaking of the eschatological order itself. Thus it was not only by a strange coincidence, but of essential necessity that he should possess the gift of healing. He was a charismatic in accordance with the self-consistent meaning of the whole. The fact that he was charismatic integrates and confirms in turn our belief that we have rightly grasped the meaning of his person and message. The whole confirms the impression of the parts of the picture; the parts confirm the whole (p. 334).

This all sounds very learned and convincing. However, when the Greek terms used by Otto are resolved into English this statement means that while Jesus was preaching that the Kingdom would come at some time in the future, nevertheless, as shown by his preaching, his marvelous deeds, and his own person, the miraculous power of the transcendent had already broken through into the world, so that the Kingdom was already a present reality. As the preacher of the Kingdom, which was realized in his own day, Jesus must of necessity have possessed healing powers. As we read Otto we discover that he has proved nothing; he has merely made dogmatic assertions without substantiation. This, however, has not prevented a number of scholars from praising his book as one of the best studies of Jesus as Messiah and his relation to the Kingdom of God.

Ferm, whose definition of miracle has been cited, in referring specifically to the miracle of the gospels writes: "The Gospel miracles stand in a class by themselves. We have here to deal with a personality, which, on any view, was unique. It is impossible to say, from any comparison with ordinary men, what Jesus may or may not have done." It is evident that this categorical state-

ment leaves the door wide open for a ready acceptance of the miracles attributed to Jesus. However, it should be noted that in his discussion of the miracles themselves Ferm tends to give them rationalistic explanations.

In the popular and widely-read "Abingdon Commentary" Edwin Lewis has an article on "The Miracles of the New Testament." Strangely enough, he gives no definition of the term; instead he specifically states that "the definition of 'miracle' is not particularly important for a N. T. study," a position that is difficult to defend. While he questions the details in some accounts of the miracles in the Gospels, and might be tempted to rationalize others, on the whole he accepts them much as they stand. In fact, he is convinced that in spite of certain difficulties that might be pointed out "the evidence is overwhelming that Jesus wrought miracles." He argues that Jesus is the "supreme miracle, beside which the greatest of his works appears as insignificant." If, as he maintains, "in Jesus Christ God made a manifestation of himself such as he has made nowhere else, then we may expect uniqueness of action to go with the uniqueness of personality." If we admit this, then the miracles are the kind of works that just such a person might be expected to perform.

Nels Ferré is a younger theologian whose books are receiving a great deal of attention. In one, "The Christian Faith," he devotes part of a chapter to the discussion of miracles. He states that we should not deny the miracles of Jesus a priori as being contrary to natural law, for to do so would be to deny that God has control over nature. More specifically, he writes: "If God as seen in Jesus Christ is the basic truth, the laws of nature must be subservient to His will. God's usual method seems to be regularity, but if He saw fit to work miracles through Jesus, if Jesus' great love under God's will have special power over nature, what right have we to say that miracles could not have taken place?" (p. 147). To deny their possibility is, he remarks further on, to deny that God is the Lord of heaven and earth. If God so loved the world that he gave himself specially in Jesus, "was it not proper that Jesus should have special power even over nature?" (p. 149 f.). While, therefore, "it is not necessary to make belief in the historicity of the miracles of Jesus an essential of Christian faith, we must not deny them categorically lest we deny the ultimacy of God and of His mastery over nature." (p. 152). However, despite his insistence that we should not use an a priori method, he appears to have done so. Moreover, it is to be noted that for him the miracles not only could have happened, but their historicity is closely related to the Christian faith which he presents throughout his book.

Richardson, Otto, Ferm and Ferré are not to be thought of as specialists in the study of the New Testament; consequently their conclusions might be considered as somewhat erratic were it not for the fact that a number of recognized Biblical scholars are in substantial agreement with them in accepting the miracles as historically authentic. Thus, MacGregor, in his commentary on John in the Moffatt series, asserts that the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, as related in this gospel, may well be "founded upon a real incident, such as the raising of Jairus' daughter, ... preserved perhaps by the 'Witness' and elaborated for didactic purposes by the Evangelist, who exaggerates its effects upon the imagination of the crowd from Jerusalem." This, as the reader no doubt has already noted, is a curious statement—for how could any exaggeration heighten the effect of a resurrection from the dead (for MacGregor assumes that this was in fact a resurrection from the grave)? Surely, the resurrection itself is far more marvelous than any elaboration of its details could pos-

sibly be. Indeed, MacGregor is not too sure of his own conclusions, for he adds that even if the story should be considered largely unhistorical, it is "none the less precious," for it testifies to the conviction of the Evangelist and the church that Christ is himself the resurrection and the life. We may raise this question, however: How valid is testimony based upon evidence as insecure as this?

Archbishop Temple, who may be considered something of a New Testament student, if not a scholar, in remarking about this miracle in his commentary on John writes: "If the Lord indeed was God incarnate, the story presents no insuperable difficulties. But of course such a creative act is quite incredible if he is other or less than God incarnate." Since the Archbishop was a firm believer in the incarnation, he can find no difficulty with this or with other miracles in the gospels. His logic, however, is quite the reverse of that of the author of the Gospel, for the evangelist presents the miracles to prove that Jesus is the incarnate Logos and the divine Son of God.

Similarly, Bernard, the author of the recondite two-volume commentary on John in the International Critical Commentary, states in his introduction with reference to the miracles of Jesus that "his complete power over nature can hardly be challenged by those who recognize his personality as Divine, and believe that He afterwards rose from the dead." Further, he avers that "he is a bold dogmatist who, in the present condition of our knowledge, will venture to set precise limits to the exercise of spiritual force even by ordinary human beings, still less when He who sets it in action has all the potentialities of the spiritual world at his command." Acordingly, he, like Temple, can readily accept such miracles as the feeding of the multitude, the changing of water into wine at Cana, and the raising of Lazarus from the grave, as historically credible.

Statements similar to these could be easily added from the works of other writers, but the writers cited are representative of those who believe that Jesus actually performed the miracles ascribed to him substantially as they are portrayed in the gospels. That a number of recognized scholars should entertain such beliefs may be an indication that a large proportion of the less learned among the Christian fellowship likewise accept them.

There are others, liberals, who reject the miracles as such, but who believe that back of each account there is a historic event which gave rise to the miraculous story, due to some misunderstanding and misinterpretation of these events by the eyewitnesses or by the evangelists. These interpreters, generally called rationalists, deny that there is anything miraculous about the miracle stories, save as the gospel accounts make them so; or, to put it another way, the gospels have made miracles out of actual events that were originally non-miraculous in character.

Among the rationalists were the early Deists, who did not wish wholly to impugn the historical accuracy of the gospels, even though they rejected the miracles. There were others besides the Deists, especially among the Germans, who accounted for the miracles in a similar fashion. Chief among them was Paulus, the author of a two-volume work on Jesus which appeared in 1828. Paulus explained the healing miracles as in part due to Jesus' spiritual power over the nervous systems of the afflicted, in part to his use of medicines known to himself alone. In some way or other these cures performed by natural methods came to be described as miracles. In a similar manner the walking of Jesus on the sea may be rationalized. Actually, this was merely an illusion; as Jesus was walking along the shore in a mist his disciples mistook

him for a spirit walking on the water. Or, to cite another instance, during a storm on the sea Jesus talked to his disciples about the wind and the weather. As he spoke, the boat gained the shelter of a promontory which protected the sea from the wind, so that it was calmer there. But the disciples (experienced boatmen though they were!) misunderstood and made a miracle out of this natural event.

The feeding of the 5,000 likewise has a simple explanation. When Jesus saw that the people were hungry, he proposed to set a good example by sharing what food he and his disciples had with those who had none. Whereupon, others who had provisions with them shared likewise with those who had none, so that all had plenty to eat. However, this incident was misunderstood and in time was interpreted as a miraculous multiplication of food. The raising of the dead is also due to misunderstanding—for the dead were only in a state of coma or catalepsy from which Jesus awoke them. But again, these awakenings were misunderstood as miracles, as resurrections from the dead.

Today, after more than a century, these and similar rationalizations are the best explanations that many professed liberals are able to give to the miracles. Among them is Albert W. Palmer, who devotes a few pages in his recent book, "The Light of Faith," to the problem of miracles (see pages 50-60). He defines the miracles of the old-time religious belief, as he terms it, as being conceived as "the immediate operation of God through his interposition, in direct conflict with natural law, not in conformity to it," a definition which corresponds to those given at the beginning of this paper. In his discussion he lists three classes of gospel miracles, "miracles of healing, miracles due to misunderstanding, and miracles of legendary misinterpretation." Actually, as will be noted, they all might be placed under his second category, that of misunderstanding.

The first type, miracles of healing, presents little difficulty. They are to be regarded as examples of mental healing, for "given so marvelous and dynamic a personality as that of Jesus, and it was inevitable that he should impart health and healing to all with whom he came in contact." Exorcisms come under this category, for Jesus "cured demon possession by a skillful use of suggestion, which, with the influence of his sanity, serenity, and strength behind it, freed the poor demoniac from his fearful delusion."

The second, miracles of misunderstanding, may be illustrated by the story of the cursing of the fig tree. This is probably a misunderstood parable. Jesus, quite likely, had warned his disciples not to be like a tree with no fruit and bearing nothing but leaves. Returning later on to the scene of this teaching, upon seeing a fig tree that had withered, the miracle-hungry disciples wrongly concluded that this was the result of a curse placed upon the tree by Jesus. Instead, they should have looked for some natural cause, such as a gopher gnawing at the roots of the tree. Similarly, the miracle of the changing of water into wine may have been the mistaken outgrowth of some teaching by Jesus concerning the peril of putting new wine into old wine-skins. His explanation of the miracle of the loaves and fish is similar to that given by Paulus. All that Jesus did was to organize the crowd, so that those who had food shared with those who had not been so foresighted.

His third category of miracles, legendary developments of actual events, is illustrated by the story of Jesus walking on the sea. Actually, he walked **by**, not **on**, the sea, for the Greek preposition may be translated either way. Thus, through misunderstanding of the Greek, this commonplace event came to be re-

garded as a miracle. As for the stilling of the tempest, Jesus spoke to his frightened disciples, not to the wind and sea, saying, "Peace, be still." As he spoke, the squall suddenly passed away. The incident occurred just as related, but the legend of a miracle grew up around it.

Perhaps we should give more attention to the area in which moderns, taking their cue from Paulus, have given the greatest latitude to their rationalizing, namely, the healing miracles. For example, Guignebert, in his book "Jesus," rejects all of the miracles save those of healing. In discussing these, however, he discovers a historical basis of fact, for Jesus was indeed a faith healer. As he states the case, "Jesus effected cures which were deemed by himself and his contemporaries to be miraculous. He attributed them to the divine dynamis which he felt within him. This dynamis, whose efficacy implied, or, more correctly, was the result of, the faith of the sick, did not pertain peculiarly to him; it manifested itself wherever there was a strong faith in its existence." (p. 203). In a similar way Calkins, in his study, "How Jesus Dealt with Men," accounts for the miracles of healing on the supposition that Jesus was a master psychiatrist. Accordingly, he writes: "Modern psychology has simply reproduced in its own fashion what we discern to have been the method of Jesus. It has perhaps unconsciously appropriated his divine approach to the human problem." (p. 8f.,). However, his use of the word "divine" tends to make these healings miraculous after all! Stolz, in his popular book, "The Church and Psychotherapy," follows a similar line of reasoning, though perhaps with greater consistency: "The basis of the cures of Jesus and of his redemptive mission was his own sublime trust in God as the source of life and the determiner of the destiny of men, confidence in himself as the Herald of the Kingdom which is opposed to the forces of evil and all that hampers human beings, and the faith of those who appealed to him for deliverance." (p. 62).

The first ten chapters of the Gospel of Mark are replete with healings of one kind or another. Further, most if not all of these healing narratives are reproduced by Matthew and Luke. Hence it may be in order to see what Branscomb, the author of the latest and in some respects the best commentary on the Gospel of Mark (in the Moffatt series), has to say concerning these cures. In his introduction he is most explicit, for he writes:

> In a day when medical knowledge had scarcely begun, when in popular circles diseases were ascribed in many, if not in all, cases to possession by evil spirits, and when prophets and religious teachers were expected to have the power to do marvels, modern inhibitions were largely absent and psychic suggestion could work more effectively. When one remembers the deep impression which Jesus made on all who came in contact with him, foes as well as friends, one has little reason to doubt that mental and even bodily effects could have been produced by his words and personal influence. (p. 33).

How does Branscomb apply this theory to individual cases? A few instances may be cited by way of illustration. Let us take the cure of the man with the unclean spirit in Mark 1:23-38. Branscomb accepts the basic historicity of this event: the man actually existed, he was actually sick, and Jesus actually healed him as described; but the healing was not a miracle. To quote him exactly: "The 'possessed' individual in the story before us shows symptoms which today would probably be diagnosed as one of several forms of hysteria. Under the influence of Jesus' personality and of the mass psychology of the crowd in the synagogue he cried out, claiming Jesus as God's holy one who had come to destroy evil spirits." Accordingly, the sick man was psychopathic, and his cure, which really hap-

pened, was not a miracle, as the Evangelists would have us believe, but is naturally explained on the basis of psychotherapy. Similarly, in the case of the man with a withered hand in Mark 3: 1-6, "it is best to explain the cure, if one accepts it as historical, as another instance of Jesus' faith and confidence in God's help to throw off some hysterical inhibitions." However, this statement fails to explain how a **withered** hand, even though this condition were caused by hysteria, could have been immediately restored to normal at a word from Jesus as the story implies. This takes us again into the realm of the miraculous.

The rationalization by Branscomb of the account of the healing of the demoniac in the tombs of Gedara (or Gergesa) who was possessed by a legion of demons (6,000), is somewhat more complicated. It is explained as an instance of madness which Jesus cured by driving out the demons which supposedly caused the man's insanity. More difficulty is encountered in the sequel, in which Jesus is reported to have permitted the demons to enter a herd of 2,000 swine feeding nearby, who thereupon ran down a declivity into the sea where they were drowned. This part of the story, so he believes, must have been due to a misinterpretation of a simply explained incident: "A herd of swine feeding on a slope might easily be stampeded by a maniac who runs shrieking and waving his arms in their direction, and the disciples would certainly have regarded their rush over the cliff as due to the demons which had just been expelled." If this were the case, the disciples apparently knew far less about the behavior of swine than they did about the behavior of fish.

These explanations by Branscomb have not been cited to criticize him unduly. Indeed, as stated above, his commentary rates with the very best. It is because of this fact that he has been referred to as representative of a liberal wing of Biblical scholars who reject the miracle stories as accounts of authentic miracles, but who wish to preserve some measure of historicity to these narrations by a process of rationalization which uncovers an authentic kernel of fact beneath the husk of the miraculous. We can readily understand the motivation for this attempt, for if the accounts of miracles and discussions about the miracles were to be omitted from the first ten chapters of the Gospel of Mark, a very substantial part of the Gospel would be eliminated from serious consideration, and the little that we assume we know about the life of Jesus would be greatly diminished. But even so, not only are the results of the rationalists of dubious historical value at best, but even if they were to be accepted they add little or nothing to the stature of Jesus. By this I mean, if we should consider that he was a psychotherapist, this would have but little significance today when psychotherapy is a commonplace thing. Or if we should believe that the swine were frightened and ran over a cliff to their destruction in the sea, this too would tell us nothing significant about Jesus.

Possibly much of the difficulty with the miracles in the Gospels is due to the fact that they are in the Gospels, which are considered by Christians generally to be especially holy and sacred. If these same miracles were to be found elsewhere, conceivably they would be considered in a more objective manner. For example, Garvie, whose article on miracles in the "Encyclopedia Britannica" was cited at the beginning of the paper, admits that the accounts of miracles in the Old Testament are "obviously conditioned by the presuppositions of the age, and would in most cases be recorded differently today." As for the miracles ascribed to the ancient and medieval saints, their character is such as to lack probability; indeed many of them may be dismissed as obvious imitations of the miracles of Christ and

the Apostles as recorded in the New Testament. But the miracles of the Gospels are regarded by him to be in a very different category: "If we believe in a divine revelation and redemption, transcending the course of nature, the miracles as signs of that divine purpose will not seem improbable." Accordingly, whereas he rejects miracles related elsewhere, even those of the Old Testament, he somewhat illogically accepts those of the Gospels with little or no question.

With these observations before us, let us turn to an examination of the infancy Gospel of Thomas, possibly composed in the second century, although our texts are somewhat later. In this gospel there are a number of miracles attributed to the child Jesus. Among them is the familiar account of him making twelve sparrows out of clay as he was playing on the Sabbath. A certain Jew told Joseph about this violation of the Sabbath laws, whereupon Joseph rebuked Jesus, saying, "Wherefore doest thou these things on the Sabbath which it is not lawful to do?" On hearing these words, Jesus clapped his hands together and cried out, "Go!" At this command the clay sparrows became alive, and flew away chirping as they went. The Jews, when they saw this, were amazed.

On another occasion the child Jesus was playing on the roof of a house with other children. When one of his playmates fell from the roof and died, his parents accused Jesus of causing this fatal accident. Jesus denied this charge, jumped from the roof to the ground by the body of the dead boy and said to him: "Zeno, arise and tell me, did I cast thee down?" The boy came to life immediately and replied, "Nay, Lord, thou didst not cast me down, but did raise me up." Those who saw this miracle were amazed, and the boy's parents glorified God for the sign that had come to pass, and worshiped Jesus.

A few days later a young man who was chopping wood accidentally cut his foot with the axe. He was at the point of death from the loss of blood when Jesus took hold of the injured foot, which became healed at once. He told the young man, "Arise now and cleave the wood and remember me." Those who witnessed this deed worshiped Jesus, saying, "Verily the spirit of God dwelleth in this young child."

On another occasion, as Joseph was sowing wheat in a field, Jesus sowed but a single grain of wheat. However, this one grain produced one hundred measures of wheat. Jesus distributed some of this marvelous crop to the poor, and his father took what was left over.

These are but four of a number of miracles related in this gospel. Curiously enough, none of these childhood miracles in this gospel is an exorcism. Indeed, apart from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, there are few if any exorcisms in the traditions about Jesus that have come down to us. Furthermore, it may be of interest that even in the Synoptic Gospels there is no exorcism in the narrations of the Passion Week. However, to get back to the miracles just cited, they do not differ markedly from miracles other than exorcisms which are related in the canonical gospels: two are nature miracles, one is a miracle of healing, and one is a raising of the dead.

How, then, should we deal with these accounts? Should they be considered as true narrations of actual miracles performed by Jesus? Certainly, this is the intent of the author; it is inconceivable that we should think otherwise. Furthermore, if Jesus the boy, as well as the grown man, was the divine Son of God, was indeed God in human form, God incarnate, it is as logical to accept these miracles as it is to accept those in the canonical gospels. But, and this is strange, there are no scholars, save perhaps some Roman Catholics, who will do so, not even those who experience little or no difficulty in accepting

the miracles in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Garvie, quite likely, would list these along with the miracles of the medieval saints as unacceptable. But why should this be? Apparently the answer is to be found in the fact previously noted that the four gospels are considered holy and canonical, whereas the others are uncanonical. Accordingly, the factor of canonicity operates to create arbitrary and artificial distinctions, or so it would seem.

Furthermore, it should be noted that no scholar who rejects these miracles in the Gospel as Thomas as unauthentic seeks to find some authentic historical kernel from which the miracle story developed. No one suggests that the stories, as they stand, are actually misunderstandings or misinterpretations of historical incidents which were non-miraculous in character, but which grew into miracles as the incidents were told and re-told. No one, in short, attempts to rationalize these miracles of the childhood as the canonical miracles have been rationalized. But why should this be? Why should all historicity be denied these incidents? Why may they not be rationalized along with the miracle stories of the canonical gospels?

Certainly, they lend themselves to this process without too much difficulty. For example, to begin with the first one, Jesus as a boy may indeed have modeled sparrows out of wet clay. Furthermore, he may have told them to take flight, throwing them up into the air, possibly over a wall or over a low building where they fell out of sight, and he may have made chirping noises as he tossed them up. All of this is quite in keeping with the play and make-believe of children. However, this natural incident was misinterpreted, and in course of time came to be thought of as a miracle in which clay birds became alive and took to flight at his word, chirping as they flew away.

The story of the boy who was raised from the dead after his fatal fall from a roof may be explained in a similar fashion. What could be more natural than this childhood story of children playing on a roof? Surely, Jesus and his playmates must have done this on a number of occasions. Also, under such circumstances it is not unusual for a boy to fall from a roof and to suffer some injury, even death, as a result of the fall. Further, it was only natural for the excited parents of the boy to have blamed Jesus, one of his playmates, for the fall. The denial by Jesus is also understandable. However, the boy was not dead, as was believed at first, but was merely stunned by the fall. As Jesus asked him to clear him of any blame, he came to his senses, and said that Jesus was not the cause of his fall. However, the incident was misunderstood, and in course of the tradition about Jesus the mistaken belief of the parents that their child was dead was remembered, and the quite natural event was related as a miraculous restoration of the boy from death to life by the divine Son of God.

The narration of the healing of the woodchopper who cut his foot and was bleeding to death may likewise be rationalized without difficulty. Either through accident or design the boy Jesus closed the end of the severed artery by pressure when he took hold of the injured foot, thereby stopping the bleeding. This, however, was not clearly understood by the onlookers, so that this simple, natural act came to be interpreted as a miracle of healing.

Finally, although we are not to take the story of the remarkable productivity of a single grain of wheat literally, the story does have a historical basis. Jesus as a boy undoubtedly helped his father plant wheat in their small plot of ground, as any other boy might have done. Indeed, he might have planted a single grain in one corner of the field. At harvest time they reaped a very fine crop, part of which was distributed to the poor. Also, Joseph, in a fatherly

way, may have jokingly attributed the good yield to the single grain planted by his son. With this as a beginning, the story of this crop grew into an account of a miracle performed by Jesus.

Are these rationalizations absurd? Admittedly, they are. However, I submit that they are no more so than many of the rationalistic explanations given by serious writers to the miracles of the canonical Gospels, as the reader may see for himself if he will but turn to the commentaries or to all but a few lives of Jesus. As noted above, such rationalizations are posited upon the belief that every story in the Gospels is of necessity based upon a historical substratum of fact—hence ingenious explanations are devised in an effort to uncover this historical substratum. When applied to the canonical Gospels this passes for scholarship; but when applied to an extra-canonical gospel such as the Gospel of Thomas it becomes nonsense.

How, then, are we to deal with the gospel miracles? How are we to understand them? First, I would say, we are to treat them **exactly** as we would treat miracles from any other source, the Old Testament, the uncanonical gospels, the apocryphal acts, the Life of Apollonius of Tyana, or the lives of the saints of the middle ages. Why, in the light of the history of the process by which the books of the New Testament became canonized, should any distinctions be made? To be sure, there are those who accept the miracles of the Old Testament without question, even though for most Christians it is less holy ground than the New Testament. Likewise, there are many Catholic scholars who have no difficulty in accepting the miracles attributed to Mary or to a saint like Martin of Tours, marvellous and incredible though they are. However, as we have seen, not a few Protestant scholars who unhesitatingly reject the miracles in these and in similar sources have little difficulty in accepting the basic historicity of those related in the Gospels, even though they feel the compulsion of rationalizing them in order to do so.

But if we are not to resort to rationalization, what are we to do with the miracles, how are we to understand them? In answer I suggest that we try the historical approach to determine, if we can, why the narrations of miracles found a place in the gospels, to discover what the purpose, the function, of their inclusion, was.

But first, for the sake of illustration, let us apply this suggestion to the miracles in the Gospel of Thomas which have been cited. All four, we should note, are designed to exalt Jesus, to show that even as a boy he possessed power over nature, over sickness, and over death itself, that he was indeed divine and a worthy object of veneration if not worship. But they served other purposes as well. Thus, the story of the sparrows which Jesus made on the Sabbath is used to attack the Jewish laws concerning the Sabbath and to show that Jesus is superior to such laws. For when the sparrows became alive and flew away, those who were accusing Jesus of violating the Sabbath were amazed and were silenced. The accounts of the healing, the raising from the dead, and the distribution of the miraculous crop of grain to the needy reveal Jesus as being compassionate even during his boyhood. Further, the healing miracle could be cited as evidence that Jesus was as powerful a healer as any deity of the time, like Isis, Asklepios, or Serapis, whereas the resurrection from the dead as performed by Jesus might be taken as a pledge of the final resurrection of those who believed in him.

Perhaps it is not as obvious that the canonical miracles serve similar if not identical purposes. First of all, they are introduced to exalt the person of Jesus, to demonstrate that he was as great or greater than Old Testament workers of miracles, that he was more than hu-

man, that he was the Christ, the divine Son of God, the incarnate Logos. That this use has been quite effective is seen by the constant appeals to the miracles to prove these very points. This function alone would be sufficient to explain the presence of the miracles in the Gospels, but they serve other purposes as well. A number—the healing miracles in particular—reveal Jesus as the sympathetic and compassionate savior. No doubt there are some who will wonder why Jesus did not extend his compassion universally by healing all who were sick. This question may have been answered in Mark 6:5-6 where it is indicated that there were those who could not be healed because of their unbelief, and the answer may have been used to explain later failures to heal by the early Christians.

The exorcisms have still another purpose. Not only do they show Jesus' power over demons, singly or 6,000 (a legion) at a time as the case may be, but they also may be taken as a prelude to the final conflict between Christ and Satan, and as a pledge that Christ will eventually overcome the Prince of demons. This conclusion is suggested in Mark 3:20-27, where it is indicated that the casting out of demons is warfare against Satan himself. This is stated more explicitly in Luke 10:18. The Seventy are represented as returning from their journey and reporting to Jesus that the demons had been subject to them in his name. Whereupon he replies, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven," clearly in anticipation of the final conflict in which Christ will overcome Satan as he has vanquished his demons while on earth.

The narrations of healings, particularly the exorcisms, performed an additional function. In the Gentile world Christianity entered into competition with other religions in which the deities, among them Isis, Serapis, and Asklepios, were considered to be healers and were worshiped as such. But the Christians could likewise claim that their Lord and savior was a healer, as he had proven by the cures he had performed during his earthly career, and could assert that by calling upon his name (apparently a common practice in early Christian times) they could cure people of their various diseases and infirmities.

Ferré, in the book quoted above, in arguing for the historicity of the miracles, asks: "Which is easier to say, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee' or 'Take up thy bed and walk?'" (p. 150). Curiously enough, this is just the reverse of the argument of the Gospel in which the healing of the paralytic is introduced to prove that Jesus possessed the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:10-11). The healing of the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath in the following chapter in Mark is a validation of the Christian repudiation of the Jewish Sabbath and its laws. Without question the raising of Lazarus is introduced in the Fourth Gospel to illustrate and emphasize the teaching, "I am the resurrection and the life." The healing of the man born blind clearly provides an opportunity for a discourse concerning the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews. It should also be noted that these and other miracles are used to explain the popularity of Jesus among the people, and the growing hostility of the leaders.

The next, and final, miracle to be discussed, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, is quite readily explained. First, it should be observed that it shows the influence of an Old Testament episode related in II Kings 4:42-44. Here we are told that Elisha ordered his servant to feed one hundred men with twenty barley loaves and some fresh ears of grain, for not only would this be enough for all, but there would be food left over. The servant did as he was told, and after the men had eaten, there was food left over, as had been foretold. The resemblance of the Gos-

pel miracle to this one in the Old Testament is obvious. Unless Jesus were deliberately imitating Elisha, it is clear that the story of the loaves and fishes is a re-telling of the older account, with Jesus, instead of Elisha, as the miracle worker. Consequently, it is somewhat beside the point to insist upon a historical basis for the miracle as told in the Gospels. We may say, therefore, that one purpose of this miracle is to exalt Jesus above Elisha, since his miracle is greater than that performed by the ancient prophet.

Furthermore, as related in John, this miracle has another function, that of accounting for the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist. As is well known, in the Johannine version of the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples there is no mention of the institution of the sacrament. However, when we turn to the account of the Feeding of the 5,000 in chapter six, we see that this miracle was intended by the evangelist as the explanation of the origin of the sacrament. For the miracle introduces a discourse in which the theme is "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." The connection with the Eucharist is more evident when we recall that early depictions of the sacrament consisted of crudely-drawn loaves and fishes. Further, in early Christian times Jesus himself was referred to as a fish.

The sacramental connection in the two Markan accounts, the Feeding of the 5,000, which is related in both Matthew and Luke, and the Feeding of the 4,000, which is related by Matthew and not by Luke is less evident. However, when we read in the first account (6:41) that Jesus **blessed** the loaves and fishes before distributing them, and in the second (8:6) that he took the seven loaves and **gave thanks** (eucharistesas), we may be justified in finding an explanation for the origin of the Eucharist in these earlier versions of the miracle as well, even though Mark includes its institution in the story of the Last Supper.

Further examples could be presented, but perhaps the ones that have been discussed will be sufficient to show that the miracles were introduced into the Gospels for definite purposes. To rationalize the miracles is to obscure their function in the Gospel records; to accept them literally is to go against our present knowledge of the world in which we live. The best way is to study them as we would study miracles in any other source, objectively and historically. When this is done they cease to be a problem for the Christian who is living in this period of human history, for he comes to an understanding of their nature and purpose which does no violence to his intelligence.