

## Chapter 10

### Nature and Object of the Mosaic Miracles

THE WRAPPING of a bush in flame that did not consume it, was a miracle, but not what is popularly understood by a miracle. It was not a violation or setting aside of nature. It was simply a supplementing of nature, an intelligent application of nature's powers, with a view to produce an unusual phenomenon: not more difficult to produce than the ordinary phenomenon of combustion, but requiring a specific discrimination as to the working of the elements to prevent combustion extending, as when a scientific professor, lecturing to a chemistry class, does the same thing in freezing water, or making it burn, or wrapping a substance in flame that does not consume it. The only difference lay in the superior power of the angelic operator (for it was an angel that appeared in the transaction; see [Ex. 3:2](#))—an operator who could manipulate the elements by a volition which vitally controlled them, instead of having to resort to clumsy apparatus that produced but a very limited result on purely mechanical principles.

The object was to arrest the attention of Moses, and to arrest it in a way that would show him that God was working by the hand of an angel. This result was effectually accomplished. Moses turned aside to find out the meaning of this flaming mystery on the mountain side. He had approached near to the object of his curiosity, when from the midst of the bush he was called by name. Responding to the call, his eyes beheld another marvel. "The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush." Flame does not act on spirit-substance such as the angels are made of (for "He maketh his angels spirits"—[Heb. 1. 7](#)). Therefore an angel can, when circumstances call for it, appear in the midst of a flame without inconvenience, as in this case; or ascend in a flame of fire, as in the case of Manoah's visitor ([Judges 13:19, 20](#)), or walk in the midst of a seven-times-heated fiery furnace, as on the plain of Dura, in the time of Nebuchadnezzar ([Dan. 3:24, 25](#)) when, in addition to the marvel of an angelic living form appearing in all composure in the white heat of a glowing furnace, three men cast into the same furnace were so mantled by the protective action of the Spirit of God as to be enabled to bear themselves in the same apparently dreadful situation, without so much as the singeing of a hair or the smell of fire passing on their clothes.

The angel in the bush forbade Moses to come nearer, and commanded him to unshoe his feet on ground made holy by the Divine presence. "Moreover, he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God" ([Ex. 3:6](#)). The principle upon which an angel could declare himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has been considered in chapter [3](#). We allude to it merely to preserve the present narrative from the confusion at first sight attaching to the way in which the angel and God are used interchangeably. Having thus secured the attention of Moses, and made him sensible of the august presence in which Moses now stood, the angel manifesting Yahweh proceeded to inform him that he had visited the earth for the purpose of effecting that deliverance of Israel, which had long been promised, but of which Moses himself had begun to despair. "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters: for I know their sorrows. And I am come down to deliver them out

of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of the land unto a good land, and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey, etc.” This would be good news to Moses; but the message did not stop there. The object of the message was not merely to announce a piece of good news in the abstract, but to take a step towards its accomplishment; like the gospel—the glad tidings of the kingdom of God, which is not merely the announcement of God’s good purpose, but a call for people to become the Lord’s instruments at last in setting up the kingdom. The message went on to say to Moses, “Come now, therefore, and I will send thee to Pharaoh that thou mayest bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” This was a part of the message for which Moses was, apparently, not at all prepared. Forty years before—while yet at Pharaoh’s court— “he supposed that his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them” ([Acts 7:25](#)); but now, after the reverses and delays and solitary pursuits of the desert, he himself had relinquished this sanguine idea; and he shrank at the proposal of it. “Moses said unto God, who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” Moses, as a man of practical experience, must have realised the stupendous difficulties in the way of such an enterprise. We, who live so long after the time. see how easily stupendous difficulties disappear in the presence of divine power; but Moses had no such example before his eyes. He knew the power of Pharaoh; he knew the helplessness of Israel, as a race of bondsmen; he knew the lack of leadership and organisation among them, and the absence of every element from the situation that would make an attempted liberation humanly feasible. It is indicative of the artless truthfulness of the narrative that Moses should be represented as recoiling from the proposed mission of liberation.

The answer to his scruples was what the case called for: “I will certainly be with thee.” This was enough for Moses himself. He knew—nay, he has evidence before his eyes, that God was speaking to him; and for God to assure him of co-operation was all that was needed to dissipate the uncertainty he felt in his own capacity for the work. But then, there were the children of Israel themselves to be taken into account. The success of the enterprise must depend upon their working with him, and how were they to be induced to lend themselves to a work so humanly unpromising in all particulars? That God would be with him, Moses could not but believe, but how were the children of Israel to be brought into a similar state of belief? “Moses said unto God, behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you, ... *Behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say The Lord hath not appeared unto thee*” ([Ex. 3:13](#); [4:1](#)). This touches a crucial point in the whole case. Moses knew his brethren. He knew their indisposition to adopt any such views as he should have to lay before them. He had had experience of it 40 years before, when “He supposed his brethren would have understood,” but they did not, as already quoted. Their treatment of Moses afterwards, during the exodus and sojourn in the wilderness; their treatment of the prophets for a succession of later centuries, and their rejection of the Lord Jesus himself, as well as the present unbelieving and unreasonable attitude of the Jews throughout the world, all attest the inaptness of the race of Israel to receive and place themselves in subjection to any proposal involving on the part of the proposer a profession of divine commission, and requiring on their part faith in the divine assurances and obedience of the divine commandments. The idea is well expressed in the parting memorial song that Moses, by God’s appointment, left them, in which he says that they are “A perverse and crooked generation, a foolish people, and unwise ... They are a nation void of counsel, neither is there any understanding in them. Oh that they were wise and understood this, that they would consider their latter end.”

In view of this inveterate national propensity in the wrong direction, the fears of Moses that

they would not believe him were well founded; and the fact that they did receive him, nevertheless, and have, as a nation, boasted in his name ever since, is one of the inexplicable facts of history, if the cause of their belief be left out of account. That cause comes immediately into view in God's answer to the expressed fears of Moses: "The Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it become a serpent, and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thy hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand" (Ex. 4:2-4). What was the object of this extraordinary performance? It is expressed in the very next verse: "THAT THEY MAY BELIEVE that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, *hath appeared unto thee.*" But perhaps one superhuman feat might only produce wonder, and fail to produce faith. "Therefore the Lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold his hand was leprous as snow. And he said, Put thy hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again: and plucked it out of his bosom, and behold it was turned again as his other flesh." The explanation accompanying this wonder reveals the divine aim in the plainest manner: "It shall come to pass if they will not believe thee, nor hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign. And it shall come to pass if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shall take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land, and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land" (Ex. 4:8-9).

Now, these are attested facts. They are attested in the way indicated in the last chapter. They are bound up with the veracity of the Lord Jesus and the prophets, whose truthfulness is proved by the fulfilment of prophecy, and in a variety of other ways. That many in our day may lack the discernment or the desire to perceive the attestation, no more abates from the fact of that attestation than the ignorance of the staring lout interferes with the scientific demonstration of the composite nature of the atmosphere or the existence of spots in the sun. What if it be a strange thing to turn a rod into a serpent and a serpent back again into a rod: is it impossible? Impossible to man, granted; but where is the man having the least glimmer of the resources of the universe, or the least acquaintance with the subtle constitution of nature, who would declare such a thing impossible in the abstract? A man can only say it is a thing he never saw happen, or heard of any other living person having seen happen. He can only say he cannot do it, and does not know how it could be done. He might even go as far as to say he does not believe it could possibly happen without the intervention of a higher exercise of power than is ordinarily at work in nature. Further than this, a man in reason could not go, unless indeed he were to add, as he might easily add, if he were a reflective student of nature, that it would be presumptuous in him to set bounds to the possible transmutations of nature in view of what he sees at work every day in the field. Does he not see any year an immense production of food substance from the soil, which, when produced, is a combination of subtle materials derived from the earth, the atmosphere, the rain, sun, etc.? Does he know how manure and loam and water are transformed into grain and garden stuff? He does not know. He is familiar with the fact, and some mistake familiarity for understanding. If our supposed critic is a wise man, he will not perpetrate this confusion. He will allow to himself that the chemical (or whatever other adjective he may use to qualify the process) operation by which muck is changed to bread, is to his mind inscrutable, although an every-day occurrence. But let him follow the bread and the fruits of the field. What becomes of them? "Eaten, of course," you say: but what becomes of the stuff eaten? Eaten by cows, they turn into cow; eaten by horses, they turn into horse; eaten by men, they turn into man;

and suppose some of the men are serpents (which they are), then they turn into serpent. Now, here is the mould that you would sweep out of your house; water that you would prefer rather to be outside your house than in; air that you cannot see; and light that enables you to see all things, but that cannot itself be seen—I say, here are all these things (much more unlikely than the vegetable fibre of a rod) turned into a serpent: and why are you to say that a rod cannot be turned into a serpent? The one serpent is made by the slow transmutation of substance, and the other by the quick transmutation of substance. Are we going to make a difficulty of the quickness? If so, to whom is it a difficulty? To us? Granted. The work would be a great difficulty to us—quick or slow; for we cannot do it slow if we had got a million years to do it in. It is not man that makes the grain by slow agriculture. He but supplies the conditions by which God does it by means of the nature He has given things. But to God? Shall you say the quickness is a difficulty to Him? If so, can you object to be charged with presumption and extremest folly in measuring the eternal by the mortal?—the possible by what you have seen?—the power of God by the weakness of man? Good friend (if you can be called good). go and gather your wits. Yield to the demands of sense and truth, lest your desire to escape the demand in this particular, lead you to the deepest infamy of all, of not only saying in your heart, but proclaiming with your poor shallow tongue, “There is no God.” For the man who says this, the Bible and true Science have but one name: “FOOL.”

The same remarks apply to the two other prodigies with which Moses was armed in his enterprise of first conquering the faith and then accomplishing the deliverance of the enslaved house of Israel. They were acts of power naturally no more wonderful than those we see in daily exhibition in nature, but only distinguished from those ordinary acts of power by their directness and rapidity. In this consisted their so-called miraculousness, and properly so-called when rightly understood. The purpose for which they were performed, required that they should be miraculous. By what other means could the confidence of Israel be commanded, or the power of Egypt be broken? Those who speak slightly of the employment of miracle in this connection, manifestly speak without competent reflection on the facts of the case. Let any man try to imagine how, apart from miracle, the Mosaic enterprise was to be accomplished, and he will find himself in hand with a problem difficult of solution; for, be it observed, as proved in the last chapter, that that enterprise was not merely the effectuation of Israelitish liberation, but the demonstration both to Israel and Egypt, and the world in general, of the existence and power of God. Had it merely been a question of Israel’s liberation, that doubtless could have been accomplished in the ways of Providence, in many ways that might be suggested; but how was God’s participation in the work to be manifest except by acts which could have no other explanation? To talk of miracles “affording no sanction” to the Mosaic religion, is to indulge in that great word-swelling of which the apostles speak, which is either meaningless twaddle, or directly opposed to fact. What mean you, ye learned gentlemen, by this ambiguous fine-sounding word “sanction”? Do ye mean authority? Ground of confidence? Power to carry conviction? Do ye mean evidence of divine consent: Warrant for human submission? Probe the nebulous phrase in what way we will, the result is to prove the necessity for miracle to establish the “sanction” of the Mosaic institutions in any valuable sense; for how could the divine consent be indicated in a way not to be mistaken, or how could the people whose obedience was demanded see plain warrant for submission, apart from works which no man could do, and which, therefore, God only could perform? Had Moses seen no angel and no burning bush unconsumed, and heard no voice, and witnessed no terrifying transmutation of his everyday staff into a serpent and back again, how could he have acquired the conviction that God had “come down (by the presence of

an angel) to deliver his people?” And how could he have been induced to visit Egypt to attempt the otherwise Quixotic enterprise of delivering a helpless slave race from the hands of powerful military masters? And how could the Israelites have been brought to the belief that God had commissioned Moses for the work, if they had not seen evidence of the fact in wonders beyond human achievement?

To the man who says that, even granting the wonders, there is no necessary connection of proof between those wonders and the God in whose name they were wrought (for the oppositions of unbelief have been refined down to the subtlest piercings between soul and spirit), it is sufficient to say that any power in the universe showing the ability, by an invisible act of volition, instantaneously to turn a rod into a serpent and water into blood, would show such proof of control of nature, and, therefore, of man, as to establish its right to be obeyed—by whatever name it might be called. Very plain people could see the philosophy of this anywhere, in any age, without formulated logic, and our complicated friends would see this too, if they were honoured with such an exhibition of power as Moses and Israel witnessed, which they are not likely to be, except in a form (at the appearing of Christ) that will not be to their comfort. The children of Israel instinctively saw the logic of it; for when Moses arrived in Egypt, “Moses and Aaron gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel. And Aaron spake all the words which the Lord had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. *And the people believed.* And when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped” ([Ex. 4:29–31](#)).

Thus was the first part of the work successfully accomplished. Israel’s faith was the natural starting point. Apart from this, nothing could be done. Without faith, Israel could not have taken that part which it was necessary for them to perform in the departure from Egypt; and without faith on their part, it would not have been fitting that God should perform works of power on their behalf. Even a human benefactor would be liable to hold his hand if he found scornful unbelief (or even indifference) among those on whose behalf he was exerting himself. How much more to be feared, and worshipped and trusted is the Creator of heaven and earth.

It may seem as if the term “faith” were misused in this connection. It will only seem so, because of the inaccuracies of modern speech. Faith is commonly understood to be a blind trust—that is, a trust not having anything actually seen to rest on. It is supposed to exclude sight altogether. This is only partly correct. As regards the particular objects on which faith may act—that is, “things not seen,” which it confidently anticipates, it is true that faith and sight cannot co-exist, but as regards the reason why this faith is exercised, it is not true. Abraham believed in the promises of God, because God gave Abraham *a reason for believing them in appearing* and speaking to him. The apostles believed in the Lord’s resurrection, because the Lord gave them *a reason for believing* by doing the same things after his resurrection. Multitudes believed in the testimony of the apostles, because they had a reason for it, first, in the fact of earnest men giving such a testimony in the teeth of all disadvantage, and secondly, in the wonderful works of power by which the truth of their testimony was divinely attested. Many believe in our day because of the reason there is for it, in a variety of facts which compel it as a logical result. In every case, faith has its foundation in facts justifying it. It acts on “things to come,” and therefore on things not seen, but it acts on them by reason of facts past that enable it so to act. It is not a blind or unreasonable sentiment. On the contrary, its eyes are open, and it can formulate the laws of its operation to a nicety. It is precisely akin to the faith of secular usage. One man has faith in another in commercial matters. His faith acts on the future, but it is derived from a past experience. Without that past experience a man does not know whether to have faith

or not. To some people, this will appear a degrading comparison, but reflection will show its justice. The cases are exactly parallel so far as the action of the mind goes. The difference is in the objects calling it into exercise.

The miracles performed by Moses in the presence of Israel in Egypt had the effect of producing faith in the promises of God associated with them. Those promises were of a very specific character. Moses was instructed thus to present them to the people: Say unto them, “The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you and seen that which was done to you in Egypt, and I have said I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt unto the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, into a land flowing with milk and honey ... and I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand, and I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with all my wonders, which I will do in the midst thereof. And after that he will let you go, and I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. And it shall come to pass that when ye go, ye shall not go empty, but every woman shall borrow of her neighbour, and of her that sojourneth in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and ye shall put them upon your sons and upon your daughters, and ye shall spoil the Egyptians” ([Ex. 3:16, 22](#)).

In these promises the people placed reliance, and on the strength of them, confirmed by the preliminary signs exhibited by Moses and Aaron, they surrendered themselves obediently to the direction of Moses. As a matter of ultimate experience, they proved themselves “children in whom is no faith,” like many who in the first case “receive the word with joy,” as Jesus says, and “in time of temptation fall away.” Still, in the first stage of God’s work with them, they believed Moses, and humbly performed whatever he directed them to do.