

CHAPTER 5

In the preceding chapter it has been shown that on this question of the evidential value of miracles the infidel is right and the Christian is wrong. It is not true that a revelation can only be made by miracles. The error of Paley's thesis can be demonstrated by argument. It can be exemplified moreover by reference to the case of the Baptist, who, though the bearer of a Divine revelation of supreme importance, had no miracles to appeal to in support of it (John 10:41).

It has been further argued that, so far as their evidential force was concerned, the "Christian miracles" were for that favored people "of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came." And if this be well founded, we shall be prepared to find that so long as the kingdom was being preached to Jews, miracles abounded, but that when the gospel appealed to the heathen world, miracles lost their prominence, and soon entirely ceased. The question remains whether the sacred record will confirm this supposition.

Who can fail to mark the contrast between the earlier and the later chapters of the Acts of the Apostles? Measured by years, the period they embrace is comparatively brief; but morally the latter portion of the narrative seems to belong to a different age. And such is in fact the case. A new dispensation has begun, and the Book of the Acts covers historically the period of the transition. "To the Jew first" is stamped on every page of it. The Savior's prayer upon the Cross (Luke 23:34) had secured for the favored nation a respite from judgment. And the forgiveness asked for carried with it a right to priority in the proclamation of the great amnesty. When "the apostle of the circumcision," by express revelation, brought the gospel to Gentiles, they were relegated to a position akin to that formerly held by the "proselytes of the gate."¹ And even "the apostle of the Gentiles" addressed himself first, in every place he visited, to the children of his own people. And this not from prejudice, but by Divine appointment. "*It was necessary,*" he declared at Pisidian Antioch, "that the word of God should first be spoken to you."² Even at Rome, deeply though he longed to visit the Christians there (Rom. 1:11), his first care was to summon "the chief of the Jews," and to them "he testified the kingdom of God." And not until the testimony had been rejected by the favored people did the word go forth, "The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and they will hear it" (Acts 28:17,23,28).

But, it will be objected, the Epistle to the Romans had been already written. True, but this only makes the narrative of the Acts still more significant. Those who profess to account for the Bible on natural principles seem ignorant of some of the main facts of the problem they pretend to solve. They give no explanation of the *omissions* of Scripture. Contrast, for example, the first Gospel with the fourth. The writers of both shared the same teaching and were instructed in the same truths. How is it, then, that *Matthew* contains not a single sentence which is foreign to the purpose for which it was written, as presenting Israel's Messiah, the "son of David, the son of Abraham"?³ How is it that *John*, which presents Him as the Son of God, omits even the record of his birth, and deals

1 Acts 10. This is made still more clear by chapter 15:2.

2 Acts 13:46 (R.V.); cf. 17:2,10; 18:1-4.

3 The prophetic utterance of Matt. 16:18 will not be deemed an exception to this.

throughout with truth for all scenes and all time? And so with the Acts of the Apostles. As St. Paul's companion and fellow-laborer, the writer must have been familiar with the great truths revealed to the Church in the earlier Epistles, but not a trace of them appears in his treatise. Written under the Divine guidance for a definite purpose, nothing foreign to that purpose finds a place. To the superficial it may appear but a chance collection of incidents and memoirs, and yet, as has been rightly said, "there is not a book upon earth in which the principle of intentional selection is more evident to a careful observer."⁴

The special and distinctive position enjoyed by the Jew was a main feature of the economy then about to close. "*There is no difference*" (Rom. 3:22) is a canon of Christian doctrine. Men talk of the Divine history of the human race, but there is no such history. The Old Testament is the Divine history of *the family of Abraham*. The call of Abraham was chronologically the central point between the creation of Adam and the Cross of Christ, and yet the story of all the ages from Adam to Abraham is dismissed in eleven chapters. And if during the history of Israel the light of revelation rested for a time upon heathen nations, it was because the favored nation was temporarily in captivity. But God took up the Hebrew race that they might be a center and channel of blessing to the world. It was owing to their pride that they came to regard themselves as the only objects of Divine benevolence.

When some great French wine-grower appoints an agent in this country, he no longer supplies his wines except through that agent. His object, however, is not to hinder but to facilitate the sale, and to ensure that spurious wines shall not be palmed off upon the public in his name. Akin to this was the purpose with which Israel was called out in blessing. The knowledge of the true God was thus to be maintained on earth.⁵ But the Jews perverted agency into a monopoly of Divine favor. That temple which was to have been a "house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17, R.V.), they treated as though it were not God's house but their own, and ended by degrading it till it became at last "a den of thieves." But the position thus Divinely accorded them implied a *priority* in blessing. And this principle pervades not only the Old Testament Scriptures but the Gospels. To us indeed it is natural to read the Gospels in the light of the Epistles, and thus "to read into them" the wider truths of Christianity. But if the canon of Scripture ended with the Gospels, this would be impossible.⁶

Suppose again the Epistles were there, but the Acts of the Apostles left out. How startling would appear the heading "To the Romans," which would confront us on turning

4 The Bampton Lectures, 1864.

5 Such was the spirit of their inspired Scriptures. See, *e.g.*, 2 Chron. 6:32,33; Psa. 67:1-3, &c.

6 "If," says the author of *Supernatural Religion*, "Christianity consist of the doctrines preached in the Fourth Gospel, it is not too much to say that the Synoptics do not teach Christianity at all. The extraordinary phenomenon is presented of three Gospels, each professing to be complete in itself, and to convey the good tidings of salvation to man, which have actually omitted the doctrines which are the conditions of that salvation." This is a fair specimen of the sort of statement which, owing to prevailing ignorance of Holy Scripture, suffices to undermine the faith even of cultured people in our day. The Gospels were not written "to teach Christianity," but to reveal Christ in the different aspects of His person and work as Israel's Messiah, Jehovah's servant, Son of Man and Son of God. No one of them is "complete in itself"; and the Fourth alone expressly professes to teach the way of salvation (John 20:31).

from the study of the Evangelists! How could we account for the transition thus involved? How could we explain the great thesis of the Epistle, that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, both being my nature on a common level of sin and ruin, both being called in grace to equal privileges and glory! The earlier Scriptures will be searched in vain for teaching such as this. Not the Old Testament merely but even the Gospels themselves are seemingly separated from the Epistles by a gulf. To bridge over that gulf is the Divine purpose for which the Acts of the Apostles had been given to the Church. The earlier portion of the book is the completion of and sequel to the Gospels; its concluding narrative is introductory to the great revelation of Christianity.

But was not the death of Stephen, recorded in the seventh chapter, the crisis of the Pentecostal testimony? Undoubtedly it was; and thereupon "the apostle to the Gentiles" received his commission. But it was a crisis akin to that which marked the ministry of our blessed Lord Himself when the Council at Jerusalem decreed his destruction (Matt. 12:14). From that time He enjoined silence respecting His miracles (Matt. 12:15,16), and His teaching became veiled in parables (Matt. 13). But though His ministry entered upon this altered phase, it continued until His death. So was it in the record of the Acts. Progress in revelation, like growth in nature, is gradual and sometimes can be appreciated only by its developments. The apostle to the circumcision gives place to the apostle to the Gentiles as the central figure in the narrative, but yet in every place the Jew is still accorded a priority in the offer of blessing, and it is not until, in every place from Jerusalem round to Rome, that blessing has been despised, that the Pentecostal dispensation is brought to a close by the promulgation of the solemn decree, "The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles."⁷

The hopes excited in the breasts of the disciples by their Lord's last words of cheer and promise were more than realized. Converts flocked to them by thousands, and "signs and wonders were wrought among the people." And, as already noticed, not only was Divine power in exercise to accredit their testimony, but also to deliver them from outrage and rescue them from bonds and imprisonment. Nor was St. Paul behind the rest in these respects. But compare the record of Pentecostal days with the narrative of his imprisonment in Rome and mark the change! When dragged to jail at Philippi as a common disturber of the peace, Heaven came down to earth in answer to his midnight prayer, the prison doors flew open, his jailer became a disciple, and the magistrates who had committed him besought him with obsequious words to comply with commands they no longer dared to enforce. But now he is "the prisoner of the Lord." His bonds are known everywhere to be for Christ (Phil. 1:13). In other words, there is no side issue, no incidental charge, as at Philippi, to conceal the true character of the accusation against him. It is a public fact that it is only because he is a teacher of Christianity that he is held in bonds. If the received theory respecting miracles be well founded, this is the scene and here is the occasion for "signs and wonders and mighty deeds" such as he had appealed to in his earlier career (2 Cor. 12:12). But Heaven is silent. There is no earthquake now to awe his persecutors. No angel messenger strikes off his chains. He stands alone, forsaken of men even as his Master was, and seemingly forsaken of God.⁸

⁷ See Appendix, Note III.

⁸ 2 Tim. 4:16. This passage disposes of the tradition that St. Peter was Bishop of Rome.

How natural the skeptic's taunt that miracles were cheap with the peasants of Galilee and the rabble of Jerusalem! A miracle at Nero's Court might indeed have "accredited Christianity." In truth, it might have shaken the world. But miracle there was none; for, the special testimony to the Jew having ceased, the purpose for which miracles were given was accomplished.

Like a day that breaks with unclouded splendor and approaches noontide in all the glory of perfect summer, but then begins to wane and early closes in amidst the gloom of gathering storm clouds that shut out the sky and darken all the scene, so was it with the course of that brief story. At the first great Pentecost, three thousand converts were baptized in a single day, the manifested power of God filled every soul with awe, and those who were His own had "gladness of heart" and "favor with all the people." And when the first threat of persecution drove them together in prayer, "the place was shaken where they were assembled...and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:23-33). The seeming check of the first martyr's death was followed by the conversion of him who caused it, the fierce persecutor and blasphemer won over to the faith he had struggled to destroy and chained to the chariot wheels of the triumph of the gospel (2 Cor. 2:14). But now we see that same Paul, albeit the greatest of the apostles and the foremost champion the faith has ever known, standing alone at Caesar's judgment seat, a weak, crushed man given up to death to satisfy the policy or caprice of Imperial Rome.

In days to come "the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb" shall mingle once again in the anthem of the redeemed (Rev. 15:3): the song of Moses--

*"I will sing unto the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously,
The horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea"--*

that song of the public triumph of Divine power openly displayed; and the song of the Lamb--the song of that deeper but hidden triumph of faith in the unseen. But now the song of Moses has ceased, and the Church's only song is the song of Him who overcame and won the throne through open defeat and shame. The days of the "rushing mighty wind," "the tongues of fire," the earthquake shock, are past. The anchor of the Christian's hope is firmly fixed in the veiled realities of heaven. He endures "as seeing Him who is invisible."