

ARTICLE VI.

Notes on the Miracles of our Lord. By RICHARD
CHENEVIX TRENCH. *D. Appleton & Co.*
New York. 8vo. p. 375.

The writings of Mr. Trench constitute one of the most important and interesting additions to scriptural Hermeneutics with which the present age has been favoured. He has very wisely adopted a custom which is becoming more and more popular—that of directing his attention to the exposition of particular parts of the sacred record, and instead of spreading his investigations over the whole field of God's word, which indeed no one man can fully occupy, he has combined his powers on a very small part. And it seems to us that only thus are we to get a thoroughly critical commentary on the Scriptures, by combining the labours of men who have faithfully and learnedly examined but minute fragments of the stupendous whole. It is by the division of labour, and the combination of results, that we are to see what we have not yet seen—a complete commentary on the Bible.

And we think that no one who has read his notes on the parables and miracles, will fail to conclude that in a remarkable degree our author is eminently qualified for the work which he has undertaken. He brings to his difficult but most important task, German learning and English good sense, with a very general acquaintance with the interpretations of the fathers: the whole governed and tempered by a truly christian reverence for the Inspired Book. Indeed his reference to patristic lore is so frequent and so reverential, that many of his readers will be disposed to think that he ascribes too much importance to what the great and good men of the church have said.

But this, if it exists, is a fault that can well be pardoned for its very rarity, in an age which has so little reverence for authority as this.

But it is not our purpose to criticise his works generally, but to call attention to that, the title of which heads our page. But we cannot pass on to our self-imposed task without commending the union of patient and learned and critical with *practical* exposition, which characterises all his

publications. We never thought that there was a necessity for a divorce of critical accuracy, from a practical application of truth; and a perusal of Alexander's admirable commentary on the Psalms has greatly tended to confirm our opinion.

Before entering on an examination of the particular miracles of our Lord, our author occupies about one fourth of his handsome octavo, in discussing important preliminary matters—on the settlement of which depends in a great degree the character and value of the work, and the nature of the results that are to be reached. The first chapter is devoted to the names of the miracles. The second is headed “the Miracles and Nature,” in which we are treated to a discussion of the relation between the laws of nature and miraculous interventions. And here the distinction is not in the fact that the one is wonderful as an exhibition of divine power, and the other not. It would be exceedingly difficult to show that there is a greater display of omnipotence in darkening the sun at the crucifixion, and causing the dead to rise—than in causing that sun to rise upon us with its daily light, or in the constant production of members of the human family. “The seed that multiplies in the furrow, is as marvellous as the bread that multiplied in Christ's hands.” There is certainly a wide difference between them—in that, one is common and familiar; and the other, uncommon and startling. But the rising of the sun for the first time, if accomplished in confirmation of a truth, would be a miraculous attestation, which none would be inclined to dispute. All nature in its complicated evolutions and developments, is a manifestation of the mighty power of God—“My Father worketh hitherto and I work.” There is no conflict then between natural and miraculous operations. They come from the same source. The object only is different. The one is designed to subserve the ordinary ends of being—the other, to accomplish some special purpose. It cannot be too earnestly insisted on that a miracle is not “*contra naturam*”—but only “*præter*” or “*supra naturam*.” And in defending this proposition, we sweep away a very large portion of the infidel's objections to the doctrine of miracles. This is remarkably true of Spinoza's assault on the miracles. A miracle is not strictly any thing *unnatural* or *disorderly*, but

is the result of a higher law superseding the ordinary, and which is only manifested at rare intervals and for specific purposes. But for a full and satisfactory exposition of this question, we must refer to the pages of the work before us.

Chapter 3rd takes up "the authority of the miracle." But as we think that our author here stands on unsound and dangerous ground we prefer to postpone our observations on this point to the concluding part of this review—when we can consider what he says at some length—in connexion with chapter 6th and last on "the apologetic worth of the miracles." The 4th chapter is one of special interest, as it enters on a field but little trodden by authors in common use. It compares the miracles of the New Testament with those of the Old—then with those of the Apocryphal Gospels, and the later, or ecclesiastical miracles. Chapter 5 examines the Jewish, Heathen, Pantheistic, (Spinoza,) skeptical, (Hume,) Schleirmacherian, Rationalistic, (Paulus,) and the Historico-critical, (Woolston, Straus,) attacks on the miracles. His discussion here is remarkable for its great fairness and clearness, and considering the necessary conciseness, its conclusiveness. The way is thus cleared for a satisfactory consideration of the wonderful works of our Lord in detail, on which our author enters with the zest of a brave critic, and with the reverence of an humble and earnest believer.

But following him no further, we pause to discuss the only prominent question in his work on which we feel disposed to do battle with him—that is, what does a miracle prove? what is its value as testimony? And here we do feel bound to break a lance (albeit at our peril) with so redoubted a champion, in defence of sound principles of interpretation and a proper reverence for the declarations of our Lord. If we understand him, (and one who writes as he does cannot well be misunderstood,) he thinks that a miracle proves little or nothing—that it is little, if anything, more than a startling appeal to the attention—the herald's trumpet call, that ushers in the final appeal to the moral sense that, sits enthroned in solemn and final judicial authority in the breast of man.

The reader may ask, why one who puts the testimony of miracles so low, should write a work of such learning

and research on them. But this *is* a question we are not bound to answer, nor could we if we would. We refer the querist to the author for an answer.

That this is the author's view, is easily proved. The inconclusiveness of miraculous testimony runs like a thread of error through the whole production, otherwise so faultless and valuable.

On page 42, in speaking of the miracles of the apocryphal gospels, he says that they are "instructive only as making us strongly to feel, more strongly than but for these examples we might have felt, how needful it is that there should be other factors besides power for producing a true miracle; that wisdom and love must be there also." From this it would seem to follow that, however strong an evidence of omnipotence any given work might exhibit, yet we would be justified in rejecting it, if that which is attested did not come up to *our* standard of "wisdom and love." This is very like the insane affirmation of the Arminian, who said Calvinism could not be proved; that if the Bible witnessed in its favor, then the witness was false, and unworthy of credit. Again, on page 46, he says, in giving the marks of true miracles, that "they must not be seals and witnesses to aught which the conscience, enlightened by the Word and Spirit of God—whereunto is the ultimate appeal, and which stands above the miracle, and not beneath it—protests against as untrue." Here he strangely forgets that miracles were employed as proofs of what the Word of God is, and what the Spirit does teach. That the men who came as God's ambassadors to us, appealed to their miracles as seals and authentications of what they taught. This form of argument might be of use to us, now that the canon of Scripture is ascertained, and the mind of the Spirit known—but certainly, to use this principle in reference to those miracles which were wrought by Christ and the Apostles, as proofs of what the Word of God was—is nothing less than reasoning in a circle. Then on page 76 he likens the miracles, considered apart from the truth they attest, to seals torn away from the document to which they were attached. But here his figure is as bad as his logic. A seal, found apart from its document, would prove something was attested—and the question would be, to what was it affixed? That ascertained, all is settled. We would

not be at liberty to *look* into the document before accrediting the seal. All we could ask would be, was the seal affixed by proper authority? So when a clearly ascertained miracle bears witness to any proposition, it is man's duty to believe, and not to judge.

But the presentation of the author's hypothesis is, as we might expect, to be found mainly in the 3d and 6th chapters, where the question is formally discussed. His first argument—that miracles cannot be taken as conclusive evidence—is, that running along with the whole line of the true, there is a parallel succession of the false and spurious, or, as he calls them, Satan's "caricatures of the holiest," and alludes to the doings of Pharaoh's magicians as an instance. But we have yet to learn that counterfeits, even when most skilfully executed, are able to take away the authority and the value of the true. Indeed the contrary has grown into a proverb—that false coin proves the existence and the worth of the genuine. That there are imitations, calls on us for greater care in scrutinizing before we accredit what claims our confidence, but certainly cannot take away the value of the true when ascertained. The fact that Satan tries "*lying wonders*," will compel us to see to it that we do not yield our confidence without patient and earnest examination. But we do not see that it is operative further than this. And it is not unreasonable to suppose that there will always be found *in the works themselves* indices which will point to their origin. At least so the magicians seem to have thought, for on beholding God's works, as wrought by Moses, they said to their master, "This is the finger of God." In relation to this case of Pharaoh, one thing is certain. God required him to believe in Moses' mission, and punished him for not believing. Now what was the evidence on which that belief and obedience was demanded? Why miracles, and nothing more. And surely God would not demand faith and submission, under such trying circumstances, on any other testimony than that which was perfectly sufficient and conclusive. And this could not be the case if the things done by the magicians were miraculous. But when we see that they were mere feats of jugglery, as they manifestly were, and might have been detected as such, we can readily understand why Pharaoh

was guilty and punishable in his unbelief. What his wise men did has been rivalled, if not surpassed, by modern Egyptian charmers, and by practitioners of sleight-of-hand in our own country.

The same is manifestly true of those pretended miracles, that Infidels have adduced as offsets to those of the Bible. Let any impartial man read the accounts we have of Apollonius of Tyana, and he will at once perceive how feeble the evidence of his vaunted wonders ever having occurred is, and how much room for deception there was, even if their existence be admitted. — Even Celsus, the great forerunner of the blasphemers of God's holy Gospel, did not believe that his were real miracles. He only used them as convenient in his argument with Christians. Origen, in his work, (*Con. Cel.*) charges him with not crediting them.

But our author appeals, (very strangely, we think,) in the second place, to the well-known fact that the miracles did not always produce conviction. He says Christ raised a man from the dead: here was the same outward fact for all: but how diverse the results—some believed, and some went and told the Pharisees. Now this argument amounts to this proposition—that cannot be sufficient and conclusive testimony, which does not force its way to universal acceptance. But this sweeps away all testimony—for any amount of evidence will be rejected by one who is wilfully and obstinately blind. The Word of God strongly affirms this truth: “If they believe not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” If they are bent on unbelief, they will reject even this, the highest evidence that can be given them. But it seems to us that the question may be settled by a reference to Scripture. If Christ appeals to his miracles as ultimate and conclusive evidence, then there is no room for doubt. And that he does this repeatedly, we hesitate not to affirm. “If I had not done among them the works that none other man did, they had not had sin: but now they have both seen and hated both me and my Father.” (*John xv. 24.*) Well may Pascal remark, on this very passage—“It follows, then, that he regarded his miracles as an infallible proof of his doctrine, and that the Jews were bound by them to believe him. And indeed it was these

miracles especially that made their unbelief criminal.” (Pascal’s Thoughts on Religion.) “Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing, thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, (his body,) and in three days I will raise it up.” (John ii. 18.) Here he appeals, to his resurrection as affording all the, evidence that the Jews asked. “The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me.” (John x. 25.) In the 10th and 11th verses of the 14th chapter of the same Gospel Christ makes this declaration: “Believest thou not that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me, or else believe me for the very work’s sake.”

But a still more remarkable passage is, found in Matthew xii. 22—32. Christ had cast out a devil, and the Jews ascribed it to a league with Beelzebub, the prince of devils. His answer tells tremendously on the question before us. He declares that the ascription of a miracle to aught else than the Spirit of God, is the sin against the Holy Ghost. But it may be said that our Saviour in this case falls in with the doctrine of the author, and appeals to the consciousness of truth and propriety in the minds of his hearers. We think, however, that his answer is an *argument ad hominem*. It would have availed him nothing to have maintained that devils could not do the miracles they had witnessed; for they manifestly believed that they could as is proved by an abundance of testimony. The argument he used was good against them, and was indeed the only one suited to the circumstances. But it is plain that Christ regarded miracles as conclusive testimony, for when the multitude immediately asked from him “a sign from heaven,” he refused it, and told them that no other signs than those they had seen should be given them, save that of his own resurrection. And as this was not to occur for some time, he plainly implied that for the present they had evidence enough.

And Nicodemus fully assents to the validity of just this sort of proof: “We know that thou art a teacher, come from God; for no man can do the things that thou doest,

except God be with him." Here again Pascal observes: "He did not judge of the miracles by the doctrine, but of the doctrine by the miracles. So that even though the doctrine was suspected, as that of Jesus Christ might be, by Nicodemus, because it seemed to threaten with destruction the traditions of the Pharisees, yet, if there were clear and evident miracles on its side, the evidence for the miracle ought to carry it against any apparent difficulty in respect to the doctrine. This rule has its foundation in the indubitable principle that God cannot lead into error."

This passage fully evinces that the Jews regarded miracles as a necessary and sufficient proof of the-Messiahship. See also Neander's *Life of Christ*, p. 133, and on the general subject, p. 138.

Additional scriptural evidence of the ground we take will be found, by reference to Mark xvi. 20, Acts xiv. 3, Heb. ii. 4, 2 Cor. xii. 12, and in many other places of Scripture that might be mentioned. The very names given to miracles in Scripture are significant. They are called "powers," intimating that nothing but Almighty power can accomplish them; "works" for the same reason, and, "signs," of what?—"that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins."

And the interpretation given by our author is, we think, liable to the gravest objection on the ground that it casts an imputation on the character of the Deity. Is it consistent with well established ideas of God—that He, a wise, powerful, holy and good being—should permit an evil power to seal a lie with a manifest and real miracle, and thus lead his creatures into error to their own undoing? The pious mind shrinks from such a conclusion, except in the solitary case of punishment by judicial blindness, which is by no means the ground taken by the advocates of this theory.

Reason seems to affirm that a real miracle is never effected without a divine interposition. Certainly, admitting that evil spirits have the natural power to work miracles, they could never exercise it without God's permissive decree, and the moral difficulty that this permission—some might call it connivance—would involve, has already been stated. But our author tells us that we must judge of the truth or falsehood of the doctrine attested, whether it is

worthy of God. Then after all, the miracle is nothing more than an exclamation mark to attract attention, and the court of adjudication is in the moral sense. The rule of ultimate appeal is within our own bosoms. Now we maintain, that of all rules this is the most uncertain and fallacious. We are not pure beings—else this principle would not be so absurd and dangerous. Our moral nature is in ruins. We see through stained glass. Each man views the question presented through the medium of his own prejudices and passions. There would be as many standards of truth as judges, and that standard in each case would be ever changing. One might as well take the hues of a dying dolphin as the standard of a given colour. This doctrine makes revelation come from within, rather than without: from the heart, instead of from God.

But we may be asked, does not the Apostle assume some such rule of judgment, when he says to the Galatians, "But though we or an angel from heaven preach any other Gospel than that we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." To this we answer, that this is a mere supposition, which does not at all imply the real occurrence of the contingency suggested, but the contrary. Such a form of implying the impossibility of a thing is very common, and is not liable to be misunderstood. It is very certain, that neither Paul nor an angel from heaven would ever be disposed or permitted to preach another gospel. And to, trouble ourselves as to what was to be done in case they did, would be about as wise as to discuss, most gravely and earnestly, what we would do with the larks, if the sky should fall and we should catch them.

It is worthy of note, in this whole discussion, that the question is not what would be the rule of judgment, if miracle were arrayed against miracle. This would be the case if a miracle worker were now to arise, teaching something contrary to the Gospel, which has already been confirmed by the same sort of evidence. This we maintain can never occur. The real question is, and this is the one which was submitted to those who saw the wonders of our Lord, what is the authority of a miracle when performed in attestation of a declaration, in reference to which there is no conflicting testimony of the same kind? And we maintain that in this we are spontaneously led to believe,

and that this disposition is sanctioned by reason and confirmed by Scripture.

But, says the objector, suppose a miracle were wrought to prove that two and two make five. Here again, we say that we prefer waiting till the case occurs, or there is some likelihood of its occurrence, before we settle the terms of adjustment. But it may well be observed, that this case, supposing it to occur, presents a very different question from that which we have been discussing. The subject of the relation of numbers is one directly before us, and within the scope of our faculties, and where there is no disturbing bias, so that as far as we can see, we can settle the question as well as an angel. But it is not so in religion. Here the subject is beyond our range. It is revelation. We are corrupt—see through a false and deceptive medium. Men vary about all moral truths, but there is no variation about mathematical propositions such as that mentioned. But this question excepted, we heartily commend this work to a general circulation.

Before closing, however, it may be as well to observe, that Mr. Trench exalts the internal evidences of revelation to the depreciation of the external. He does indeed deny this, but we think that the impression made on his readers will be that in reproving those who relied solely on miracles for the establishment of revelation, he commits the same fault he condemns, although in a contrary direction. He relies, almost or quite, entirely on the internal evidence. And if we mistake not, this is the manifest tendency of most modern apologists. But the truth is, that both these pleas are erroneous. All the various sources of evidence are important. One class being best suited to one temper of mind—another falling in most readily with a different. The man who would sneer at the testimony of the Christian's consciousness and call it fanaticism, may be overwhelmed by the argument from miracles. All the sources of evidence are independent, and may be so considered—though of course they support each other when viewed in combination as a harmonious whole.