

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jtvi-01.php

JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS
OF
The Victoria Institute
OR
Philosophical Society of Great Britain

VOL. LXXVII
1945



LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY
THE INSTITUTE, 12, QUEEN ANNE'S GATE, WESTMINSTER, S.W.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

War conditions made it impracticable to hold an Ordinary Meeting on February 26th, 1945, the Paper for that date was circulated to subscribers and is here published, together with the written discussion.

THE MEDICAL MIRACLES OF OUR LORD.

BY H. J. ORR-EWING, M.C., M.D., B.S., F.R.C.P.

IT was suggested that a Paper upon this subject might prove of interest to the Members of the Institute. It is unnecessary to say that neither the writer nor anyone else supposed that he would be able to add anything new to the knowledge contained in the voluminous works already published on the subject by many experts in many languages.

The reason for the proposal was that the writer is, himself, a physician, and hence interested in the medical side of the question, and further more that he has had the privilege of twelve years residence and work in the Land where God Manifest in the Flesh accompanied with men, and so should be familiar with the very same diseases with which He dealt and the race into which he chose to be born. In a Paper of the necessarily restricted length of this one it will not be supposed that any attempt will be made to examine in great detail all, or indeed any, of the many beneficent deeds of healing recorded in the Sacred Pages.

Actually, there are at least 24 separate recorded instances of miraculous healing of individuals of which some detailed account is given, and there are a good many other places where we are told that "He healed many of divers diseases," or in similar words are made aware that He exercised His healing powers upon considerable numbers of persons at one time. There are three separate instances of restoration to life, four of recovery of sight to the blind, a similar number of cases of demoniac possession cured, two of paralytics healed, a similar number of cases of lepers cleansed, and one instance each of a number of other disabilities such as dropsy, deadly fever of Peter's mother-in-law and a number of others, with the unnamed afflictions of the nobleman's son and the centurion's servant—the only two cures wrought *in absentia*.

As already mentioned, volumes could be, and many have been,

written on these cases ; each one meriting a close study and detailed examination ; and to such the writer has had pleasure in devoting himself in days past, and with the help of such indispensable aids as works by Trench and Edersheim ; to name only two, has had not only interest but also profit ; but such is beyond our present scope, and it is proposed to deal with matters upon much more general lines.

There are many objections to the miracles, and Trench enumerates no less than seven general lines along which such have been raised, and doubtless in our sceptical age many more variations could be produced ; but there appears little profit to be gained by the detailed discussion of such. To one who devoutly believes in the Incarnation there is not the least difficulty in subscribing to a belief in the healing miracles. In fact, it appears to be the height of absurdity to believe that God could be Manifested in the Flesh in the Person of His Son, could break into our human life and existence in a Divine manner, and that having done so, he would not, in the presence of the world of sin, disease and death—reverently be it said—be forced to show forth His Glory by dealing with such evidences of man's suffering and man's fate as a result of sin.

As one glances through the list of the diseases, which Christ then healed, one finds oneself once again back in Palestine in the 20th Century. The same diseases (with the notable exception of demon possession, of which more anon) are still to be found in the streets and lanes once trodden by the Son of God. The blind still form one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest medical problem of Palestine. Figures are misleading : It has been well said that there are three kinds of lies—"lies, bad lies and statistics" ; but the percentage of the native peasant population infected with trachoma and other diseases, which, untreated, progress to blindness, such as the almost universal prevalence of conjunctival infection, the incidence of ulceration of the cornea and other diseases, was, in 1920, when the writer first went out, truly appalling. Things were better then than years before, and are much better now. The Order of St. John of Jerusalem with its magnificent ophthalmic work, has been one of the main agencies whereby cure—and even better, prevention—have been accomplished. But even to-day the incidence of blindness is at least ten times what it is in our own country, and a sickening and common sight is that of a peasant mother with a poor little baby on her back with both eyes fast closed exuding pus, and

swarms of flies buzzing round to feed on and carry the infection elsewhere. Blindness, therefore, should be prominent in a list of diseases dealt with in Palestine by the Great Physician, and blindness is so found.

Paralytics are still a common sight there. The incidence is no greater than here, or little more, but here we keep our poor paralysed people in and do not allow them to be dragged out and laid in public places to excite the charity and sympathy of the passer-by (such is no longer allowed in the cities, but was a common sight until recently).

Leprosy is still present, though, obviously, to a much diminished extent. History, not only in Bible times, but as late as that of the Latin Kingdom, shows us that this foul plague has been rife up to modern days.

The woman with the hæmorrhage, the man with dropsy, the woman crippled by spinal arthritis, still are found in just the same way as they were present in New Testament days. The devastating fever, which struck down Peter's mother-in-law was presumably malignant malaria, which has so often claimed its hecatomb of victims in the land, especially along the Litoral of the Sea of Galilee, where her infection occurred.

It is sometimes said that the miracles were but instances of the healing art displayed through the medium of a great and outstanding personality with a hypnotic power unequalled by any other; that the cures wrought by the Divine Master were those over hysterical persons, and that such could have been cured by others, who also might possess to a great degree the power of impressing their personality upon others. The man at the Pool of Bethesda is especially thus cited (St. John v). Here, we are told, is a typical example of a man with a hysterical paralysis of the legs, who was waiting for the miraculous cure to be effected, when the bubbling of the siphon spring should proclaim to the credulous a mysterious healing presence of an angel. There seems to be little doubt that many of the people clustered in the five porches were cases of hysteria: hysterical disease is extremely common amongst the Jewish Race—it is said (it is mere hearsay) that in a particular London Hospital, whose out-patient clinic deals with a large Hebrew clientele, that there is a notice, in a position only visible to the doctor: "Do not forget that Jews do sometimes suffer from Organic Disease!" and it is possible that the man in the porch was so affected. Many instances are on record of hysterical paralysis which has

lasted many years, being suddenly cured by a shock, or in a hypnotic seance, or by similar agency—one has seen such oneself; and to the sceptic it might be conceded that this man may have been such a case. However, after 38 years of paresis, a cure is not as a rule possible so suddenly to such an extent. Hysterical blindness, dumbness, deafness, etc., may be instantaneously cured; but 38 years of muscular inactivity would produce such weakness, such contractures, such incapacity, that for such a one to leap up and walk away with his pallet bed presents almost insuperable difficulties; and there are other miracles which could not possibly have been explained away in such a manner. Hysterical blindness, true, may occur, but the writer has never seen it in Palestine and never heard of it there. Nearly all the hysterical cases seen there were concerned more with the motor functions (although these are unusual) or occurred as fits (fairly common) or as various symptoms complained of, such as unbearable pains, for which no known organic cause existed. That four cases of hysterical blindness should thus occur, and be recorded as cured, when all around our Lord we are certain were hundreds of people blind from organic disease, is absolutely incredible, and one at least of the victims was "born blind." As Spurgeon said, the only thing the Pharisees and Rulers were not able to gainsay was the fact that the man saw, and the only thing that his terrified parents were compelled to admit was that he was born blind. No hysterical blind man was ever blind from birth. Dropsy cannot be a hysterical manifestation, nor can atrophy of the hand, nor persistent hæmorrhage.

The case of the nobleman's son and the centurion's servant are quite inexplicable upon any such hypothesis, however far-fetched, for they had no direct contact with the Healer, nor, in the case of the boy, had the patient apparently any faith, however faint or remote, in Him. Then, again, leprosy is a slow, progressive, incurable (when well established) disease, and here we are told of a man full of leprosy, who, with a sublime faith transcending mere human power, comes and says "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean," and received his cleansing with a touch. No! should we concede the man with paralysis or even both the men with paralysis, the rest of the miracles cannot be explained by any such fantastic theory. The opponents of miracles call upon us for far more credulity to enable us to accept their explanations than do the miracles themselves.

There is a class of miracle, that of the cure of demon-possession,

which calls for rather more detailed study. Books could be (and at least one actually has been) written upon this vexed question. There are so many problems that arise :—The nature of the phenomenon in the people who were “demonised” (the name “demon-possession” comes from Josephus and is never used in the New Testament); Our Lord’s view of the matter; the commonly held ideas; all these are most interesting, and difficult points and explanations are legion in number. A very usual method of solving the question seems to be “that the ignorant people of Christ’s day believed that many diseases, which with our more advanced knowledge we know to be due to other causes, were to be ascribed to the agency of demons.” Epilepsy, deafness and dumbness, mania, are amongst the lesions thus attributed to the in-dwelling of evil spirits. Another explanation of our Lord’s attitude to the question is that with His “kenosis” he deliberately limited himself to the beliefs and views of His day in such matters. Another suggestion is that whilst He knew that such things were not to be attributed to the assigned cause, yet he forebore to point out the error, dealing with the people along the lines of their own knowledge and exercising His power over their condition by seeming to drive out evil spirits for the sake of the afflicted sufferer himself. It is objected that demon-possession, to use the ordinary term, never occurs nowadays, that the phenomena described do all occur as forms of obsession, insanity or as other manifestations of mental disease, and that, therefore, these explanations meet the case.

As to the first question : one has been much interested in the problem as to whether such manifestations do not still occur in heathen lands. There is a restraining power in nominally Christian countries, where, in spite of so little real Christianity, there is, nevertheless, always a great volume of devout prayer and worship ascending, which is lacking in the “dark places of the Earth, which are full of the habitations of cruelty.” In the moral sphere, of course, we all recognise that there are widespread evidences of true demon-possession in the state of men imbued with every species of ferocity and cruelty; but here the question is more of physical manifestation. Do such actually occur, and can they be attributed to demoniac agency? The testimony of many missionaries from such parts of the world as China is that there men and women do become demon-possessed and that demons frequently have been exorcised by

the Power of God, through the name of Christ pronounced by His servants. Many of us will remember instances given in such well-known books as the "Life of Pastor Hsi." But, disappointingly, when recently a questionnaire was sent to a number of medical missionaries from China, asking whether they personally had seen such cases, which they, as trained *medical* observers, could recognise as differing from the obsessions of the insane and had seen such dealt with, those who replied all stated that, whilst they believed such instances to occur, that they felt the evidence was too strong to be refuted, whilst they had had such cases reported to them, nevertheless, they themselves, personally, had never seen such cases before and after treatment. That is a rather disappointing negative. On the other hand, as every commentator suggests, it would be only reasonable to suppose that such an event as the Incarnation and the Son of God being Manifested to destroy the works of the devil, would hardly fail to arouse special manifestations and efforts of the powers of evil themselves, even along such lines as the in-dwelling of men by fiendish powers. Edersheim makes the point that such possession or in-dwelling is nowhere stated to be a permanent or continuous state, and not always did it imply complete moral degradation, for one had been "afflicted even from a child," and undoubtedly the sense of a dual personality was present in some instances. So that, whilst with regard to the small body of expert medical opinion which one has been able to collect, the question as to whether the phenomenon exists to-day, the verdict must be one of "not proven," yet there seems no reason to conclude that such could not have been present in Christ's day, and there are a number of compelling evidences that it did, for it is impossible to believe that the Son of God, to whatever limitations He voluntarily subjected Himself, held the same superstitions as the ignorant folk He came to save. Actually we know that He did not; for the view of the Evangelists and those which they attributed to Him are poles asunder from the contemporaneous Jewish and Rabbinic notions of the same problems. Incidentally, the same remark applies with equal force to their ideas of remedies for such conditions as blindness, hæmorrhage, and indeed all others. For a detailed and masterly treatment of the subject by an expert in Rabbinic Law one must refer to the appendix on the subject in Edersheim's immortal work. But the writer has, himself, seen enough of even present day eastern Rabbinic Judaism,

beliefs in the possession of devils, their exorcism and methods of preventing their influence, to be able to testify that Christ's views on the subject were far apart from those held by the Jewish people of His day. One does not, of course, refer to enlightened Jewish beliefs, but as a great deal of one's time in Palestine was passed in treating those delightful people, the Eastern Sephardic, the Yemenite, Halabi and Palestinian Jew, whose religious views are so clouded and tainted by the belief in the personal in-dwelling and malevolent action of demons, one can the more readily understand the beliefs about such matters, which prevailed in the early Christian Era ; commencing with Lilith, the female demon who must be warded off from the lying-in bed with charms, through the hundred and one malevolent spirits who cause sickness and must be propitiated by votive offerings or averted by amulets ; the whole of life is surrounded by such ideas.

To return to the point that He, knowing otherwise, yet appeared for the patient's sake to believe in these things in order to free the victim from his obsessions : this is alike both impossible and abhorrent ; for He sent His disciples to cast out demons, thanked His Father in moving terms when they returned glorying in their success, chided them with their failure to succeed in the case of the epileptic boy and agreed with the Pharisees on the subject, in such a way as to leave in one's mind no doubt that He, Himself, did, in fact, firmly believe in the objectivity of the phenomenon with which He dealt. Besides which, to agree to the patient's ideas, to act as it were by a sort of super hypnosis, or rather mesmeric influence on the poor disordered mind of the sufferer, would prove no genuine cure. The Psychiatrist does not attempt to help nor does he succeed in curing his patients by agreeing with their obsessions, nor by exorcising their fears by acknowledging the reality of their cause. It might be possible, by supreme effort of personality and mind, sometimes to quiet a maniacal patient by such methods, but such are never used ; for apart from the extreme difficulty and unlikelihood of even transient success, they could never prove curative. The patient whose obsessions were thus momentarily relieved would shortly fall victim to other equally fallacious and dangerous delusions. Christ's cures were permanent cures. See the Gadarene demonised, clothed and in his right mind, not kept under the magical influence of the all-dominant quietening personality which had wrought his cure, but sent home as a witness

of God's Goodness and Power! No! whatever was the exact nature of the disorder; why it was clear to the Saviour and the recorders that some were demonised and others not, such as deaf or dumb; why some showed themselves as epileptic, others as maniacal; where the moral began and the physical ended; are matters which it does not appear possible to solve and certainly the writer is not competent to attempt to do so. But this he firmly believes, Christ came into contact with a class of sufferers whose bodily and mental diseases were but a part of their trouble; they were under the malign influence of evil and spiritual forces which had obtained an overriding, overmastering power over them. That such phenomena were especially prevalent at the time of the Divine Manifestation in Human Form appears certain. That such occur under certain circumstances to-day appears probable; but no complete explanation is entirely satisfying. In the words of Oesterley: "Christ saw in the case of every 'possessed' victim a result of sin, not necessarily through the co-operation of the victim. Sin he saw embodied in Satan, who is identified with demon; he was the personification of the principle of evil, which was manifested in men in a variety of ways. When Christ exorcised a demon by His Divine Power He drove evil out and at the same time obliterated the visible results of sin."

Space prevents more than a mere reference to the climax of the miracles, the threefold restoration to life from physical death:—A child whose spirit had but just passed beyond the confines of this world, a young man some hours dead, and Lazarus three days in the grave. If we only had the case of Jairus's daughter we might consider it possibly as a trance, for did not Christ, Himself, say "She is not dead, but sleepeth." But the Evangelists apparently make it clear that He spoke figuratively—"They laughed Him to scorn, *knowing* that she was dead." But the young man at Nain had been dead for hours and was on his way to burial, and although Jesus spoke of Lazarus, again figuratively, as asleep, He, Himself, explained plainly "Lazarus is dead." Explanations are, of course, useless; comments unnecessary. He, the Prince of Life, "Who death, by dying, slew," "Himself could not be holden by death," and even before He passed triumphant through its dark portals He had recalled these three souls from physical death to physical life; the climax of the miracles—and yet He said "Greater works than these shall ye do because I go to the Father." For even now He calls

men and women from spiritual death to spiritual life by means of the "foolishness of preaching" and the witness of His ambassadors.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS.

Dr. H. S. CURR, M.A., B.D., B.Litt., Ph.D., wrote: As far as the possibility of the medical miracles, performed by Our Lord, goes, there can be no doubt or question in the minds and hearts of those who believe that God exists, and that with Him all things are possible in heaven and in earth. These convictions are rooted and grounded in the greatest of all miracles whose truth involves the credibility of all other signs and wonders. I refer to Our Lord's resurrection, a medical miracle which He performed, and which immeasurably surpasses all others in grace and glory. Medical miracles are but one class of supernatural happenings which were due to the finger of God in Jesus Christ, His Incarnate Son. These observations may profitably be extended to include all the medical miracles recorded in the Bible, including that strange story in II Kings xiii, 20-21. The Acts of the Apostles also records some striking instances.

A variety of random reflections occur as one considers the subject, so clearly and helpfully discussed by Dr. Orr-Ewing. Thus it may be observed that, since medical science was so rudimentary in Our Lord's day, His medical miracles were almost a necessity. There was no other way of effecting a cure. Again, attention may be drawn to the spiritual value of these incidents. They were usually conditioned by faith in the recipient of the blessing, or in his friends. They were frequently associated with spiritual healing. They have been well described as acted parables. As for the intractable problem of demon possession, may it not be argued that it has disappeared like such medical miracles as Our Lord habitually wrought? It was a passing phase of evil just as the latter were a passing phase of good.

Dr. Orr-Ewing refers to the great words of Our Lord, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do;

because I go unto My Father" (John xiv, 12). The miracles of modern therapeutics are the best commentary on these words, as far as the subject under consideration goes. Feats can now be performed by up-to-date means and methods which would have been dismissed as incredible or impossible a hundred years ago, while the achievements of medical science a hundred years hence will be such that none can now foretell what they will be, save only that they will reveal new heights and depths of significance in these words of the Great and Greatest Physician.

Mr. ARNOLD S. ALDIS, M.B., B.S., B.Sc., F.R.C.S. wrote: There is, I think, a trifling error on the first page when it is stated that the healing of the nobleman's son and the centurion's servant were the only cures wrought *in absentia*; for there remains the case of the Syrophenician woman's daughter. I found the paper a most excellent summary of the whole matter but could have wished that it had been somewhat expanded.

Mr. JAS. B. NICHOLSON wrote: I was much surprised on reading the paper on "The Medical Miracles of our Lord" by Dr. H. J. Orr-Ewing, to find that he was not at all satisfied that such a thing as demon possession occurred.

The whole history of the China Inland Mission is a testimony to the reality of this. Dr. Hudson Taylor had personal experience of the presence of demons on at least one occasion, I think at Ningpo, when he was lodging over the premises of a man whose business was connected with idol worship.

He spent a very wakeful night calling on God for help as demon forces were most evidently attacking him. Many of the C.I.M. missionaries have told how demons were cast out, some of these men were medicals.

In the January issue of *China's Millions*, published in Toronto, Mr. E. Smith, of Sienka, Chekiang, China, tells of two striking instances in his own experience, of which he made notes at the time. In the Australian I.V.F. Magazine, Dr. Norman Deck, who has spent most of his life in the Solomon Islands, writes as follows: But though spiritist phenomena are not common amongst our

“civilised” communities (except in spiritist circles), missionaries who work among the heathen, especially among animists, soon become aware of their reality. Dr. Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary in Korea for many years, has written what is probably the classic on the subject, in his “Demon Possession, and Allied Themes” (Revell’s). The subject also appears in “Pastor Hsi” (C.I.M.). Once I wondered about the matter, but now, after an experience of thirty odd years in the British Solomon Islands, I am firmly convinced about the reality of spiritist phenomena and demon possession. The first case (among many) which opened my eyes took place in 1916, and is worth recording. I had gone, with a Christian interpreter, into the interior of San Cristoval on a Gospel tour. At one of the villages visited I had preached the Gospel with the aid of pictures of the Crucifixion of our Lord, His Resurrection, and Ascension. It was necessary to start at the Creation, for the heathen had no concept of a supreme God Who made the universe; then followed the Fall and the Incarnation. The audience of about 100 was intensely interested. The evening meal was had at sun-down. Later my bed was made on some banana leaves on the ground in a corner of a house, with my interpreter near by. There were from forty to fifty heathen in the house. About midnight I was awakened by a great commotion among the natives. They lit some torches made of the resin of a nut-tree, and across the room was a man, a heathen priest, talking most rapidly and in a curious falsetto voice. I asked what was the matter. The interpreter replied that the man was possessed with a “devil-devil.” I asked what he was saying (for I did not understand the native language). He replied that it was the “devil-devil” speaking. But I objected that I could see his lips moving. He replied, “Oh, you new chum, you no savvy nothing about this. This man no talk, ‘devil-devil’ talk through mouth belong him.” I may explain that pidgin English is the *lingua franca* of the Islands. Then I asked, “What is the ‘devil-devil’ saying?” The reply was astounding. The spirit was blaspheming Christ, saying that He was a wicked person, and that the people were not to listen to me. I was dumbfounded. Why this opposition to Christ? The man had never heard the Divine Name before I preached at supper time, and I had not said anything about spirits to rouse opposition. It was a direct challenge.

What was I to do? I had heard before of such things from missionaries working in China. I could not let the challenge go by default. After prayer I went forward and, placing my hand on the man's shoulder, I said in English, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God come out of him." The man had no knowledge of English whatever. But the immediate result was that the man became very violent, and I stepped back in a hurry. His voice went up and up in a crescendo until he shouted "Au gawa," *i.e.*, "I depart." Immediately the man became quite quiet; and when he spoke again it was with his natural voice. He had no knowledge of what he had been saying. The incident was too vivid ever to be forgotten. The man was not converted. I understand that he died not long after. I never saw him again. But the incident made me realise just what missionaries are up against, "not flesh and blood" merely, but the organised antagonism of the Devil. There seems to be no other explanation of the fact that the Evangelical message so often rouses opposition among the heathen.

Mr. ELLIOT FITZGIBBON contributed some very lengthy comments in twelve paragraphs (too long to be inserted) supporting the view that demon possession is prevalent to-day, sometimes in forms not generally recognised.

AUTHOR'S REPLY.

Mr. A. S. Aldis is perfectly correct in his statement that I am inaccurate in my omission of the Syrophoenician's daughter as a miracle wrought *in absentia*.

Dr. Curr's comments are very helpful. I feel, however, that the "greater works" referred to by our Lord transcend any purely physical cures, wrought by modern therapy or by any yet to be discovered. As a physician I yield to no one in my admiration of these methods and marvels, but none of them, present or future, can be said to be "greater" than the restoration of sight to the blind by instantaneous cure or the raising of a body after three days in the tomb.

I cannot possibly argue with Mr. FitzGibbon. He apparently holds that all mental disease is a form of "Demon Possession."

I quite agree that in a certain sense all disease is the result, primarily, of the presence of sin in the world, and therefore originally has its *Fons et origo* in the machinations of the Devil, but I do not believe that all, or indeed much, of mental disease is due to the "demonisation" of the sufferer. His beliefs seem to be a return to the superstitions of the Middle Ages or to such as are still found among the more ignorant natives of Palestine and similar backward countries.

I am sorry I conveyed the impression to Mr. Nicholson that I was not at all satisfied that such a thing as demon possession occurred. I used the expression "not proven" in its technical sense, not as implying disbelief, as, as far as *my* investigations are concerned, no irrefutable proof had been produced. The whole history of the China Inland Mission is a testimony to this, says Mr. Nicholson, which is rather a sweeping statement. They were medical missionaries of the C.I.M. with whom the Home Director kindly put me in touch, and they were the people who replied as I recorded. However, I have always felt sure personally that such possession does occur and the instance from the Solomon Islands quoted in the article forwarded by Mr. Nicholson from the pen of Dr. Norman Deck would appear to me to satisfy any but the most prejudiced reader that such a phenomenon is there described. I am most grateful to Mr. Nicholson for bringing this case to my notice.*

*[A most valuable contribution to this subject, though nowadays not easily accessible, is *Demonic Possession*, by W. M. Alexander (Edinburgh, 1902). Ed.]