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978-1-108-04503-2 - George Fox's 'Book of Miracles'

Edited by Henry Joel Cadbury

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

MIRACLE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

The importance of miracle in the history of religion is well known. A survey of religions both of civilized and of uncivilized man reveals few if any from which the belief in miracles is absent. Especially of miracles of healing do accounts come to us from nearly all peoples and religions. Not only in Christianity from the earliest times until now, but also in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China and Japan, in the religions of Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Islam have occurred episodes which even to contemporaries have seemed to be miraculous cures.¹ Though the method of description has often shown marked similarity in the various records, this is not due to a literary dependence that would throw doubt upon the independent origin and credibility of the events narrated. It is inevitable that such stories whenever told should follow a natural technique of presentation.

The environment of the early Quaker movement and its own inner enthusiasm were well suited for the growth of a belief in miracles. The assurance of the sects that the powers of the apostolic age were being manifested in them led to a confidence in their contemporary ability to prophesy and to work cures. William Prynne in 1645 accuses the sectaries, and in particular Captain Paul Hobson, of 'boasting of working miracles and casting devils out of men possessed by their exorcismes, as the Jesuits and Papists doe'.² Among the errors listed in 1646 by Edwards in his *Gangraena* was the power to work miracles.³

¹ Cf. C. J. Wright, *Miracle in History and in Modern Thought* (1930), pp. 64 ff., 130–41.

² *A Fresh Discovery of some Prodigious Wandring—Blasing—Stars & Firebrands, Stiling themselves New-Lights, etc.* p. 13.

³ Part I, Error no. 145, p. 32. Cf. the specific instances of such claims, p. 66 (Anabaptists healing the sick with the anointing of oil), p. 136 (Kiffin's cure of a woman by the same means), p. 213 (Henry Denne's cure of a gentlewoman near Canterbury of an incurable disease, by means of dipping).

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Mathew Coker, whose tracts were published in 1654, was a notable instance of one who claimed to have worked miracles, and his claims were accepted by no less orthodox a person than Robert Gell, D.D., Rector of St Mary, Aldermanbury.¹ One of his tracts is *A Short and Plain Narrative of Matthew Coker . . . in reference to his Gift of Healing which is here clearly evidenced in several remarkable instances*. A little later in his *Whip of Small Cords to Scourge Antichrist* he argues that although miracles abated by division from Rome, yet he and his contemporaries could claim according to the measure of grace the gifts of the Apostles' times. He also distinguishes miracles from healings, arguing that they are distinct in Scripture:

That act that makes the lame to go immediately is much different from the laying on of hands, which on a wound being placed, conveys immediately vertue but heals not up under many days or weeks sometimes, according to the quality of the wound. So that wound which by plaister requires long time will also proportionably by that gift take long time, but yet ordinarily cures within half the time the other doth. So that such healings though miraculous, are not in themselves miracles, for that such healings may & usually are effected by physick and by plaister. But yet as to this they are miracles, in that touching the manner and way of cure they are healed without such means, and that by laying on of hands, the form and way in the Apostles' days of conveying the Holy Ghost on believers, and the form and manner always of exercising the gifts of healings proceeding by and from that self same Spirit.²

The Baptist leaders in England practised the Biblical injunction of anointing the sick with oil, evidently with a conviction shared by the patient of its curative effect.³

¹ See Robert Barclay, *Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth* (1876), pp. 218 f., for Dr Gell's Letter to Lady Conway.

² *A Whip of Small Cords*, p. 4. Here and elsewhere the modern reader needs to be reminded that 'go' meant walk.

³ Cf. Adam Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists* (1818), vol. 1, p. 452. The custom was based on James v. 14–15. It continued into the eighteenth century in England and America.

Samuel Bownas in his first visit to America noted among the differences between Friends and the 'Quaker Baptists' or followers of John Rogers whom he met in Connecticut 'the anointing of the sick with oil' and adds

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The Records of a Church of Christ Meeting at Broadmead, Bristol 1640–1687 are Baptist accounts parallel in place and date and even in content to important Quaker sources. We may note therefore that they contain a circumstantial narrative of a member who fell distracted in 1673. Physical means were used to banish his rage, but all in vain. Three successive days of prayer were held by the church, which in turn cast out his rage and blasphemy, his horror and fear, his shame and dumbness, until as the writer concludes, he 'hath been very well ever since in his body. Magnified be the Lord!'¹

A second account referring to twenty years earlier but recorded after the preceding may be quoted in full:

One of the members of the congregation, sister Tyly by name, had a daughter then about — years of age, that was bewitched as termed; but the child was very much changed and had strange fits, and as it were haunted by an evil spirit, that it would say such a woman was in the room; though they carried it to Bath. The whole church put apart a day for it to seek the Lord by fasting and prayer, when brother Jessey was here, and the child was restored well as before and to this day. The glory only be given to our God.²

To other Nonconformists Quakerism itself was a disease akin to distraction and subject to the curative use of intercessory prayer. In the *Diary of John Angier*, pastor of Denton near Manchester, Lancs, for 14 October 1663, we read:

I heard a neighbor was distracted. He had received some books from the Quakers and had some acquaintance with them. We

(MS. Journal at Swarthmore College, omitted in printed edition) 'not in use by any besides themselves that I have heard but never admitted any unbeliever to be with them in time of prayer over the sick'. For examples of cures by this means in earlier centuries, see F. W. Fuller, *The Anointing of the Sick in Scripture and Tradition* (2nd ed. 1910).

¹ Edited for the Hanserd Knollys Society by E. B. Underhill (London, 1847), pp. 191–4.

² *Ibid.* pp. 194 f. For other references to Baptist miracles, see below, pp. 83 f., 95.

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prayed with him and it pleased God, though he raged before, and at prayer time, yet after he was very quiet for a time. We besought the Lord for him on the Lord's Day and he was better, blessed be God.¹

From New England's earliest chronicles, apart from the usual array of 'providences' and 'judgments', few miracles are recorded. John Winthrop has two cases of children's recovery from injury in his *Journal* under 17 September 1644, a part of his MS. not published until 1825. Both were daughters of members of the Church in Boston, and for both earnest prayers were made by the Church. The cures were evidently recorded as miracles. Winthrop writes:

It may be of use to mention a private matter or two; which fell out about this time, because the power and mercy of the Lord did appear in them in extraordinary manner. One of the deacons of Boston church, Jacob Eliot, (a man of a very sincere heart and an humble frame of spirit,) had a daughter of eight years of age, who being playing with other children about a cart, the hinder end thereof fell upon the child's head, and an iron sticking out of it struck into the child's head and drove a piece of the skull before it into the brain, so as the brains came out, and seven surgeons (some of the country, very experienced men, and others of the ships, which rode in the harbor) being called together for advice, etc., did all conclude, that it was the brains, (being about half a spoonful at one time, and more at other times,) and that there was no hope of the child's life except the piece of skull could be drawn out. But one of the ruling elders of the church, an experienced and very skilful surgeon, liked not to take that course, but applied only plasters to it; and withal earnest prayers were made by the church to the Lord for it, and in six weeks it pleased God that the piece of skull consumed, and so came forth, and the child recovered perfectly; nor did it loose the senses at any time.

Another was a child of one Bumstead, a member of the church, had a child of about the same age, that fell from a gallery in the meeting house about eighteen feet high, and brake the arm and shoulder, (and was also committed to the Lord in the prayers of the church, with earnest desires, that the place where his people

¹ *Chetham Society Publications* (1937), N.S. no. 97, p. 130.

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assembled to his worship might not be defiled with blood,) and it pleased the Lord that this child was soon perfectly recovered.¹

EARLY QUAKER MIRACLES

It was natural that the early Friends should expect miraculous power. They testified to the contemporary coming of the Spirit among them in a manner comparable to New Testament times. Visions, insights and prophecies were vouchsafed to them which the event proved to have been true. They recognized Divine providence in their escapes from danger and Divine vengeance in the disasters of their foes. A power to cure could be accepted as no more supernatural than these other recognized phenomena.

While the association of miracles with George Fox was the most conspicuous, other Friends had their experiences. Nayler and his associates in Exeter prison in 1656 believed that he had raised to life a woman that was dead,² by laying his hands upon her. Probably she was only in a faint. In any case Nayler made no claim to have raised her by his own power.

The opponents of Quakerism gave circulation to the following account of her own testimony and Nayler's at the time of their arrest in Bristol:

The Examination of James Nayler

- Q. How long hast thou lived without any corporal sustenance, having perfect health?
 A. Some fifteen or sixteen days, sustained without any other food except the Word of God.

¹ *Winthrop's Journal, 'History of New England' 1630-1649* (edited by J. K. Hosmer) in *Original Narratives of Early American History* (1908), vol. II, pp. 209 f. The first girl was Abigail Eliot, niece of the apostle to the Indians. Cotton Mather who gives her first name, mentions also that a silver plate as big as a half-crown was used to close the orifice. He concludes: 'But an history of rare cures in this country would fill more pages than may here be allowed' (*Magnalia Christi Americana*, book VI, ch. II).

² This was Dorcas Erbury, daughter of an 'honest minister' in Wales, the well-known William Erbury. See Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, p. 247; Brailsford, *A Quaker from Cromwell's Army*, p. 110. Her Christian name was enough to suggest the story. Cf. Acts ix. 36 ff.

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- Q. Was Dorcas Erbury dead two days in Exeter? And didst thou raise her?
 A. I can do nothing of myself: the Scripture beareth witness to the power in me which is everlasting; it is the same power we read of in the Scripture. The Lord hath made me a sign of his coming.

*Dorcas Erbury, the Widow of William Erbury, once a Minister,
 but a seducing Quaker: her Examination*

- Q. Christ raised those that had been dead; so did not he.
 A. He raised me.
 Q. In what manner?
 A. He laid his hand on my head, after I had been dead two days and said, Dorcas arise: and I arose and live as thou seest.
 Q. Where did he this?
 A. At the Gaol in Exeter.
 Q. What witness hast thou for this?
 A. My mother who was present.¹

It should be recalled that British readers at the time were not unprepared for claims of even the supreme miracle of recovery from death. In 1651, for example, was published at Oxford what purported to be the sober and well-authenticated account by a medical student of the revival of a woman executed by hanging.²

A special miraculous intervention is related from Severn, Maryland, in a letter of Robert Clarkson to Elizabeth Harris dated 14th of the 11th month 1657. He says:

Richard Beard was in a miraculous way convinced in the fore part of the summer by a clap of thunder, he being at work in the wood and one more with him in rainy weather. And at that instant it thundered much, as is usual in the summer time, in so much that

¹ John Deacon, *The Grand Impostor Examined: or, the Life, Tryal, and Examination of James Nayler* (1656), pp. 18, 33 f.; reprinted 1656 and 1657, and in the *Harleian Miscellany* (1745), vol. VI, pp. 396 f., 399. The work was translated and published in Dutch in 1657. The trial is included in Ralph Farmer, *Sathan Inthron'd in his Chair of Pestilence* (1657), p. 19.

² *Newes from the dead, or a true and exact narrative of the miraculous deliverance of Anne Greene, who being executed at Oxford, Decemb. 14, 1650, afterwards revived.*

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it wrought a fear in him and put him to think of his condition. And it did appear to him to be unsafe, he seeing nothing to trust to, there being so many opinions in the world that he did not know which to choose. He then being in fear, not knowing what would become of him in that condition, desired that the Lord would manifest to him concerning the way which was known amongst us whether it was the true way of God or not, and that it might be made known to him by thunder. And at that same instant there came a clap of thunder which was very great in so much that it broke a tree very near them and struck him that was with him to the ground and himself could scarce recover from falling. And a powerful answer came to him at the same instant, that that which he had inquired of was the true way of God; and forthwith he declared it abroad and were (*sic*) convinced thereby wherein I hope he abides.¹

Miracles of this confirmatory type are rare in the Quaker sources. Sewel supplies a parallel in his account of the converted murderess who was hanged at Bury St Edmunds in 1668. At her execution she prayed for a visible sign that she had been received into God's favour: 'Though it was then a cloudy day, yet immediately after she was turned off, the clouds broke a little and the sun for a few moments shined upon her face, and presently after ceased shining and the sky continued overcast.'²

¹ Swarthmore MSS. III, 7, where Robert Clarkson's letter was copied over in one addressed to George Taylor and Thomas Willan by Thomas Hart, dated London, 28th 2nd mo. 1658. This paragraph is omitted by James Bowden, in quoting the letter in his *History of Friends in America*, vol. I, pp. 340 ff. and also by Rufus M. Jones, *Quakers in the American Colonies*, p. 245.

This is probably the Richard Beard who came from Virginia to Maryland, patenting in 1650 a plantation in Anne Arundel County. His home was in South River Hundred next to Severn. He appears frequently in the Maryland records. In 1674 he signed a petition on behalf of the Quakers. He was a member of the Maryland House of Burgesses pretty continuously between 1662 and 1676. By 1681 he had died leaving five children. A few of the facts about him are collected by Hugh B. Johnston, Jr., in *William and Mary College Quarterly* (1938), 2nd ser. vol. XVIII, p. 351.

² W. Sewel, *History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* (Philadelphia, 1844), vol. II, p. 160. Her conversion is attributed to William Bennit in this and earlier English editions, but in the original Dutch (1717, p. 547) to John Crook.

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Instances of healing are more usual in the Quaker records. An entirely characteristic account is given by John Taylor, later of York, in his *Journal*, referring to a visit he paid to Nevis in 1662:¹

I staid about three weeks or more in the island [Nevis], and travelled from meeting to meeting in the town at Haydockes and up in the country. I had one at William Fifield's house, &c. whose only daughter lay very sick at that time; and the doctor, and her parents, with others all looking for her departure.

So I coming to the house, they had me into the room where she lay a dying as they all thought; but I went to the bedside to her, and took her by the hand and stooped down that she might hear me, and asked her, if she had so much faith as to believe she might recover and be raised up to health again? But she was, as it were, speechless, and so weak that she could not speak, they said: yet at length she said, 'yea'. So being then moved of the Lord, I kneeled down by her bedside to prayer in the power of Christ Jesus our Lord; and when I had done I arose up, and presently she arose up and sat upright in her bed, and spake pretty heartily; so that the old doctor and they all, wondered and praised the Lord; the doctor having said before, he had done what he could for her recovery, so would meddle no further but leave her to God's disposing, for he saw no hopes of her recovery.

In the evening I went down to the seaside to the town, in order to go aboard a ship bound for Barbadoes.

But the next morning the young woman got up, and walked out, and took her fowls and made some other provisions, with the help of her mother and father, to send to the ship for my voyage to spend at sea. So by the Lord's power, the young damsel was raised from her sickness to health, to the great admiration of all that knew it.

Another incident on the American continent and perhaps the first to be published in print by Friends as a miracle, though that word is not used, is *A True Discovery and Relation of the Dealings of God with Goodworth Horndall, wife to John Horndall in Newport upon Road-Island in New England*. The seven-page narrative of the mental unrest and recovery of this lady, who because she had once

¹ *Memoir of John Taylor* (1710), pp. 17 f.; (1830), pp. 33 f.

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relapsed after accepting Quakerism feared she had sinned against the Holy Ghost and was tempted to commit suicide, is described on the main title-page as 'the several late conditions of a Friend upon Road-Iland before, in, and after distraction'. The Friend who reassured her and who wrote the narrative was apparently Humphrey Norton, who with John Rous and John Copeland signed as witnesses.¹

From New England also comes the cryptic account written by Samuel Hooton, son of the early Quaker woman preacher Elizabeth Hooton. 'Something concerning my travel and of the dealings of the Lord with me since the Lord brought me forth from my dwelling' is the title of the MS. preserved in London.² The date of the events is not given, apparently they occurred between his mother's last visit in 1664 and her death in 1671. At any rate, Richard Bellingham (d. 1672) was still alive. The place is eastward of Boston, probably about Dover, New Hampshire.

And when I came to the east parts of New England the Lord wrought great things by me there, and many came in amongst us, that the meeting at the eastward way increased much whilst I was with them and the hand of the Lord was with me, praises to his name forever, both in outward miracles and in the work of the Spirit. One woman that had been convinced was nigh unto death that none thought she could have lived, and when the doctor had left her and given her up for dead then was I made glad that so they might see the power of God above the doctor and all outward physicians. So the Lord raised her up by his own power from that very time and she became a fine Friend.

There was another woman that was no Friend that was nigh unto death, and when many people of the world were about her looking when she should depart this life and her husband and family crying I was made to go amongst them to the woman that was nigh death, and when I had kneeled down to pray with her, her spirit revived from that same time, and the Lord healed her and all the people saw it and said it was the Lord's work. And

¹ *New England's Ensign* (1659), pp. 110–16.

² Portfolio 3–80 at Friends' Reference Library, printed in *The Friend* (Philadelphia, 1904), vol. LXXVII, pp. 204 ff.

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this woman was after a fine and a tender hearted woman, who much loved me, and several that saw it praised God and came to meetings; so that the blessing of God was upon the eastern parts; several great men came; so the word of God was prospered.

The earliest Quaker record of a miracle is perhaps the following in a letter to James Nayler from Richard Farnsworth, dated 'Balbie the 6th of Julie' 1652, and endorsed by Fox himself 'r farworth 1652 a merakell at Chesterfeld':

...the presence of the Lord went along with me, and in Derbyshire at a great market town called Chesterfield, his power was much manifested through me among some of their greatest professors. I was at a stand for hearing them. They have a new gathered church as they call it. But there was one of them that lay under the doctors hand of a fever and I was made instrumental by the Lord, and she was made well.¹

To Fox himself we are indebted for the following account of a cure by Mary Atkins, a little-known Friend of Dursley Meeting in Gloucestershire:

There was Thomas Atkins and his wife who lived not far off Nailsworth, a shop keeper. And they told me there was a separate meeting of the Presbyterians, and they took an oath of their people that they should neither buy or sell or eat or drink with Friends. And the eminentest woman amongst them fell sick and fell into a benumb condition so as she could neither stir hand or foot, and all the doctors could do her no good.

And at last there came two or three women to Thomas Atkins' wife into her shop, pretending to buy something of her, and she showed them things they asked for, and so they did confess in discourse with her that they had taken an oath as aforesaid, but the occasion of their coming was concerning this woman that lay in that misery, to desire some help and advice from her as to her recovery. And she asked them how they could dispense with their oath and they said they must be forced to break it.

So Thomas Atkins' wife took the woman in hand and cured her. And so the Lord broke the wicked bonds of the Presbyterians

¹ Swarthmore MSS, I, 372.