

The Problem Of Miracles

by Dr. Greg Bahnsen

More often than not the modern mind finds abhorrent the occurrence - or even the possibility - of miracles. Miracles would disrupt our simplistic (and impersonalistic) views of the predictability and uniformity of the world around us. Miracles would indicate that there is a realm of inscrutable mystery for the (pretended) autonomy of man's mind. Miracles would testify to a transcendent and self-conscious Power in the universe which unbelievers find unnerving. So rather than examine whether miracles have in fact occurred or take seriously their reports and significance, it is better, thinks the unbeliever, to dismiss their possibility in advance.

So we will hear critics of Christianity say things like: "How can anybody with even a smattering of high school science believe that a virgin can conceive a child, a man can walk on water, a storm can be calmed upon command, the blind or lame can be instantly healed, or a dead corpse can resuscitate? The modern world knows better! The miracle-claims of Christianity are evidence of its irrationality and superstitious character." In the face of such ridicule and challenge, Christians sometimes cower in silence, when in fact it should be the critic who is intellectually ashamed - put to shame by his historical ignorance, as well as the logical defects in his thinking.

Slandering The Past

You will notice in the hypothetical challenge to Christianity's credibility which is expressed above (meant to be representative of the actual negative mindset and comments of unbelievers which we encounter), there is an unquestioned and arrogant assumption that a critical mindset about miracles is the exclusive property of "the modern world." The philosopher David Hume snidely remarked that it forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors....[\[1\]](#)

Over and over again you will find non-Christians who simply take it for granted that people in the ancient world believed miracles took place, to be blunt, because: (a) they were too scientifically stupid to know better, (b) they were gullible and naive, and/or (c) they were fascinated and eager to find anywhere they could traces of magic in their experience.

Of course, on those three scores we should wonder if the enlightened modern world has any reason for pride, really. It is not the least bit difficult *today* to locate scientifically stupid people, even college graduates. Watch them try to "fix" things with a hammer, deal with an unwanted cockroach or rationalize their smoking; listen to their home-cures for a hangover. And as for gullibility and magic! In our oh-so-smart "modern" world have you ever heard about get-rich-quick investment schemes, diet fads, lottery fever, or the wonder of crystals (or pyramids, etc.)?

Or listen to all those respected entertainers on TV talk-shows telling large, attentive audiences about their "former lives," or about the healing power of meditation, or about "social karma" and "mother earth," or about the "human face" of communist tyranny in our century, etc. These are hardly evidences of a critical mind or superior rationality.

Believe It Or Not, Skepticism Has Been Around

Clear-thinking people should beware of sloppy and self-serving generalizations about, or comparisons between, one age (or culture) and another.

Even more, they should refrain from manifesting the kind of historical ignorance which imagines that people who lived before our enlightened, modern age were, in general, never critically minded or were readily fooled (or more easily than we would be) into accepting tales of miracles. After all, what is the source of the expression occasionally still used in our day "he's just a doubting Thomas"? Remember Thomas, called Didymus (the "Twin"), from the gospel of John's account of Christ's resurrection (John 20:24-29)? Down through subsequent history he has come to be called "Doubting Thomas" *just because* of his skeptical mindset regarding one of the greatest miracles in the Bible. Thomas would not readily accept the testimony of the other apostles that they had seen the resurrected Savior.

And he was not alone in that spirit of disbelief. Even those who personally encountered Christ after He rose from the dead were not excitedly awaiting or jumping with eagerness at the opportunity to believe that a wonder had taken place. Two disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31) as well as Mary Magdalene (John 20:1, 11-16) were so *disinclined* to believe such a miracle that they did not even recognize Jesus when they saw him. (Gestalt psychology helps us understand that kind of experience, which all of us have had when "seeing" somebody we know, but not recognizing him "out of normal context" or in an *unexpected* setting.) Matthew relates that even in the presence of the resurrected Lord and knowing who He was supposed to be, "some doubted" (Matt. 28:17).

When the gospel of the resurrected Savior was taken out into the ancient world, there was then - even as now - a general antagonism to the credibility of such claims. Paul proclaimed the resurrection of Christ before the Council of Areopagus in Athens, but the Greek poet Aeschylus many years before had related, in the story of the very founding of the Areopagus, that it was there declared that once a man has died "there is no resurrection." The ancient world knew its share of skepticism and denunciation of miracles. Luke writes that when Paul's address to the Areopagus brought him to the claim about Christ's resurrection, his audience could hardly be characterized by general gullibility and a predisposed willingness to affirm the miracle! Instead: "now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *mocked*," and others more politely put Paul off to another time (Acts 17:32). Ridicule of miracles did not begin in the modern world of enlightened science.

Just like our own culture today, the ancient world was an intellectually mixed-bag. Like us, it had its share of superstitious and mystically minded people; as we do, it had people whose thinking was ignorant, misinformed, lazy, stupid, illogical and silly. But also like our own age, the ancient world had *plenty* of people who were skeptical and cynical. (Indeed, those were even the names for two prominent schools of ancient Greek philosophy in the period of the New Testament!) Plenty of people in the ancient world were critically minded about reports of natural wonders and magical powers. Many not only doubted claims to miracles and found them incredible, but even precluded the very possibility that such things could occur.

The Truth Claims Of Christianity

This was so much the case that you will notice the apostle Peter felt it necessary to make this declaration in his second general epistle: "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). Peter knew that it would be easy for people to "write off" the claims of Christians as just so much more idle chatter and story-telling; he knew that people in his own generation had dismissed the church's proclamation about Jesus because they would not believe such claims regarding miracles. Far from being stupid and gullible, Peter's contemporaries had to be assured that apostolic accounts of Jesus were not cunningly devised fables, but the eyewitness truth.

It was important for the Christian testimony in the midst of an unbelieving culture that followers of Jesus have a reputation for not "giving heed to fables" (1 Tim. 1:4) or entertaining "old wives' tales" (1 Tim. 4:7) - that is, fictitious accounts which are the very opposite of "the truth" of Christianity (2 Tim. 4:4). The hostile world of unregenerate men would only too gladly dismiss the claims of the gospel narrative as being of the same mythical nature - fabulous, unreliable, exaggerated.

The point here, very simply, is that contemporary critics of the Christian faith who automatically dismiss and ridicule the miracle-claims of the Bible because of the alleged widespread ignorance and gullibility of the ancient world only bring shame to themselves for their own ignorant prejudices and unwarranted generalizations. Like today, defenders of the faith in the ancient world encountered significant opposition and negativity about the alleged occurrence of miracles - hostility ranging from sophisticated philosophical repudiations to gut-level mockery. If people living in those days came to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, walked on water, healed the sick and was raised from the dead, it was *not* because they categorically were weak-minded and ignorant fools, ready to believe any and every fable that came their way.

Begging The Question

The unbeliever who dismisses in advance the Biblical account of miracles should not only be ashamed of his arrogant slander against the ancient world's alleged ignorance and gullibility, he should also be embarrassed by the logically fallacious character of his "reasoning." Consider again our earlier statement from a hypothetical unbeliever, summarizing the actual comments which we hear from non-Christians: "How can anybody with even a smattering of high school science believe that a virgin can conceive a child, a man can walk on water, a storm can be calmed upon command, the blind or lame can be instantly healed, or a dead corpse can resuscitate? The modern world knows better! The miracle-claims of Christianity are evidence of its irrationality and superstitious character."

Unbelievers who speak this way are usually quite unaware of the fatuous and fallacious character of what they are saying and suggesting. They often think that they are treating the miracle-claims of the Bible as independent evidence that the Christian worldview is rationally unacceptable. Their reasoning is something like this: we already *know* miracles do not occur ("How could anybody believe..."), and since Christianity claims that such impossible things did occur (e.g., virgin birth, resurrection), we can draw the conclusion that Christianity must be false. But that conclusion is not so much "drawn" as it is taken for granted from the very outset. The denial of the very possibility of miracles is not a piece of evidence *for* rejecting the Christian worldview, but simply a specific manifestation *of* that very rejection.

Only if the Christian worldview happens to be false could the possibility of miracles be cogently precluded. According to Scripture's account, God is the transcendent and almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Everything owes its very existence and character to His creative power and definition (Gen. 1; Neh. 9:6; Col. 1:16-17). He makes things the way they are and determines that they function as they do. "His understanding is infinite" (Ps. 147:5). Moreover, God sovereignly governs every event that transpires, determining what, when, where, and how anything takes place - from the movement of the planets to the decrees of kings to the very hairs of our heads (Eph. 1:11). According to the Bible, He is omnipotent and in total control of the universe. Isaiah 40 celebrates in famous phraseology the creation, delineating, direction, providence, and power of Jehovah (vv. 12, 22-28). He has the freedom and control over the created order that the potter has over the clay (Rom. 9:21). As the Psalmist affirms, "Our God is in the heavens; He has done whatsoever He pleased" (115:3).

Faith vs. Faith

Very simply, according to the Biblical witness: "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Rev. 19:6). Therefore, in terms of the Christian worldview, there is nothing "too hard" for God to do according to His own holy will (Gen. 18:14). Because of who He is, "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26; cf. Mark 14:36). Nothing can stay His hand or prevent Him from accomplishing what He wishes.

Now then, if this God depicted in the pages of the Bible actually exists, then it would be preposterous to try and rule out the *possibility* of miracles. God could accomplish anything - from parting the Red Sea to raising the dead. It is important to keep this in mind when we encounter unbelievers who confidently reject Christianity and ridicule its credibility on the basis of its fantastic claims about miracles which have taken place in history. To declare in advance that the miracles narrated in the Bible *did not* occur because such miracles *could not* occur, and that "therefore" Christianity is false, is simply to "beg the question" that separates believers from unbelievers. It is to take for granted what the unbeliever needs to prove - that the Christian worldview is not true.

So you see, given the common ridicule of unbelievers about the incredibility of miracles, the alleged problem with such events comes down to nothing more than the unbeliever's personal prejudices masquerading as "modern rationality." The unbeliever who brashly and rhetorically asks how anybody with a modern education could believe in miracles, thereby repudiating the intellectual respectability of Christianity, has *upon analysis* asserted no more than this: "Unless the Christian worldview is true, the presence of miracle-claims in the Bible is evidence that the Christian worldview is not true." How trivial.

What we usually find, then, is that unbelievers who reject the miracle accounts in the Bible are simply giving expression to their own philosophical prejudices - their presuppositional commitment to a solely naturalistic understanding of the world in which we live. This hostile philosophical precommitment has not been demonstrated to be true, but simply taken for granted in an uncritical fashion.

The presuppositional nature of the dispute over miracles becomes very clear once we stop and analyze what we mean in speaking of a "miracle."

The Concept Of The "Miraculous"

The word 'miracle' does not appear in the text of Scripture. The events recorded in the Bible which we would be inclined to label 'miracles' are rather called in the Old and New Testaments "signs," "wonders," "works/acts [of God]," "what is wondrous, astonishing," "omens," or "powers." The Biblical words thus lay emphasis upon one or more of these features:

1. THE AMAZING AND EXTRAORDINARY CHARACTER OF THE EVENTS BEING DESCRIBED (FULL OF WONDER, EVOKING ASTONISHMENT),
2. THE DIFFICULTY OF THESE EVENTS EXCEEDING NORMAL HUMAN ABILITY (FULL OF POWER, AN ACT OF DIVINE STRENGTH), AND/OR
3. THE PURPOSE OF SUCH EVENTS POINTING BEYOND THEMSELVES TO SOME SPECIAL THEOLOGICAL LESSON OR TRUTH (SIGNS, OMENS).

What is interesting for our purposes is that, while hinting at it, these characteristics do not in themselves amount to the full concept of a miracle as discussed in religious and philosophical circles. The connotive stress of the Biblical words is somewhat different from (though not contrary to) what is accentuated in the modern English word 'miracle'.

There are events which clearly go beyond ordinary human strength or ability (cf. 2); yet they too would not (apart from rhetorical flourish, again) seriously be called "miracles." A hurricane is much stronger than a man, and no mere man has the ability to generate or thwart a hurricane. But hurricanes are not miraculous events in themselves. Indeed, there are some meteorologists who can explain in extensive detail the natural factors which bring about hurricanes, can account for how they operate and dissipate, and can even do a reasonably accurate job of predicting when they will occur and what course they will take. But no meteorologist can give a causal account of Jesus stilling the raging storm at sea with a simple verbal command.

We should observe, as well, that human beings are exposed to natural things and events - like the beauty of the sea or grandeur of the stars - which point beyond themselves to the theological wonder and glory of God the Creator, according to Psalm 19 and Romans 1. Nevertheless, in our ordinary discourse we do not speak of the surging sea or orbiting planets as "miracles." They are signs, even signs which leave us with a sense of wonder. Yet they are also quite "natural." Not at all like turning water into wine or raising the dead.

What we call "miracles" are more than amazing events, more than powerful occurrences, more than parabolic theological lessons. What distinguishes the "miraculous" event from all these other grand things which happen is its specifically supernatural character. The miracle is an extraordinary and awe-inspiring event which in its character (or sometimes in its timing) cannot be explicated by known natural principles or controlled by mere human beings. That is its *super-natural* quality.

Some Conceptual Misdirections

The supernaturalness of an event which is to be classified as a "miracle" has often been misconstrued, even by well-meaning apologists for the faith. Before we look more pointedly at the supernatural quality of miracles, we should be warned off from certain misleading theological or philosophical paths.

Miracles As A Personal Directive

It is sometimes thought that miracles are *super-natural* because they amount to divine intrusions into the ordinary and predictable operations of an otherwise "closed" and self-perpetuating domain of "nature." Mechanical metaphors are often used to give a picture of this natural order, for instance the metaphor of a well-designed clock which God devised, wound up, stood back from, and now runs on its own - except for those rare occasions when the clock-maker steps in to interfere with the way He intended the clock to operate.

The more philosophically sophisticated way to describe this situation is to speak of "natural law." The events which transpire in the universe, whether monumental or minuscule, are viewed as inevitable and predictable according to causal factors which can, in theory, be described in systematic, law-like principles. Many ancient Greek philosophers (e.g., Heraclitus, the Stoics) conceived of an eternal and impersonal "logos" or "reason" governing or flowing through the realm of matter, thus organizing all motion or activity into a rational order.

The religious version of this notion that there are "laws of nature" postulates a personal God as the origin of the material world and of the causal principles by which it operates, but this God (and the free or arbitrary exercise of His almighty will) is nevertheless "separated" from the ordinary and ongoing workings of the world He made. God has chosen not to directly govern every detail in the created world on a moment by moment basis, and thus "nature" has laws inherent in it which determine what things are like and how things happen. Variations on this conception of God's world as governed by impersonal natural laws are found in a wide range of Christian professions, from Deism to Thomism (Roman Catholicism) to evangelical Arminianism.

Given the above conception, the *super-naturalness* of a "miracle" consists in its "violation" of the laws of nature. God interferes with the machinery of the world in its law-directed actions and procedures. This is a flawed and terribly misleading way of thinking about the cosmos and about God, however. God's self-revelation in the Scriptures offers no support for the idea that there are impersonal laws of nature which make the world operate mechanically and with an inevitability which is free (ordinarily) from the choices of God's will. In fact, the Bible offers us a view of the world which is quite contrary to this, one where God and His agents are seen as intimately, continuously, and directly involved in all of the detailed events which transpire in the created order.

God personally created and now *personally directs* all the affairs of the world. The sustaining of all animal life and renewing of the plants in this world is the work of God's Spirit (Isaiah 63:14; Psalm 104:29-30); Jehovah's Spirit is intimately involved with the processes of the created world, from the withering of the flowers to driving the rushing streams (Isaiah 40:7; 59:19). God's decretive will governs all things which happen, from the changing of the seasons (Genesis 8:22) to the hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30). Even the apparently fortuitous events in this life are planned and carried out by His sovereign will (Proverbs 16:33; 1 Kings 22:28, 34). Paul declares that God "*works all things according to the counsel of His will*" (Ephesians 1:11). That is, He causes everything to happen which happens. There is no semi-autonomous, self-operating realm of "nature" whose impersonal laws are occasionally "violated" by the God who reveals Himself in the pages of the Bible. Nothing is independent of Him and His sovereign, immanent, personal will.

Miracles As Super-Ordinary Providence

Another misconception of the *super*-natural quality of miraculous events holds that, while God plans and causes every thing that happens in the world, sometimes He carries out His choices by more "direct" or "immediate" power, rather than through the ordinary means of His providence personally at work in the natural world. As an example of the difference, we might think of the way in which God usually exercises His providence to bring loaves of bread into the world - planting and harvesting the wheat over time, working in the kitchen with a recipe, baking the dough, taking it from the oven, etc. By contrast, it is thought, God can "miraculously" bring about the same effect, but do so without using the normal means within the created world. He can "immediately" bring loaves of bread into existence, as Jesus did with the multiplying of five loaves to feed five thousand people (Matthew 14:19-21). A miracle comes, then, to be viewed as an "extraordinary providence," an unusual event produced by the "immediate" power of God.

This generalization is unclear. Why is not the baking of bread said to be accomplished by God's "immediate" power? Because it utilizes the means of heat produced by burning wood. Well then, why is not the burning of wood (or the chemical interactions involved, etc.) said to be accomplished by God's "immediate" power? It seems like the mediate and immediate exercises of God's will are only relatively (or subjectively) distinguished by how we choose to look at the process involved. The generalization we are considering is also hasty and fallacious. Not all Biblical "miracles" can be readily classified as "immediate" acts of God's power. The parting of the Red Sea for the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt was one of the greatest and well-remembered wonders of the Old Testament. Yet Exodus tells us that God accomplished it *by means of* the natural phenomenon of a strong east wind. One day Jesus healed a blind man through the natural means of applying mud (spittle and dirt) to his eyes. When Jesus stilled the storm on the lake, He utilized the natural means of His human voice to rebuke the waves. The notion of a miracle being *super*-natural because it is a "direct" act of God intervening in the ordinary operation of the world creates more conceptual headaches than it resolves.

Miracles Of Darkness

A further misunderstanding of the supernaturalness of miraculous events is detected in the common conviction that "miracles" can be genuinely performed only by the living and true God - in which case any duly authenticated case of a miraculous occurrence functions as a marker or evidence that God is at work, usually verifying the divine approval of the message or the person of the miracle-worker. But this premise is simply out of step with the Biblical witness itself.

On the day of judgment there will be people who had worked mighty works, even casting out demons, who will not have the approval or acceptance of God (Matthew 7:22-23). When Moses worked miracles by the power of God before the Pharaoh, Scripture tells us that the court magicians were able to replicate some of them, obviously by the evil power of Satan (e.g., Exodus 7:11-12). False prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1-2) and false messiahs (Matthew 24:24) are recognized in God's word as having the power to perform miracles. A beastly leader in Revelation 13:13-15 has attributed to him the working of great miracles, like calling fire down from heaven and causing a statue to speak. Why do evil men perform such miraculous deeds? To deceive men and lead them into theological error, to lure them into lies (cf. Deuteronomy 13:2; Revelation 13:14). Accordingly, the Bible can describe these evil miracles as "lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9) because they are amazing events which lie about God and mislead His people - *not* (as some interpreters illegitimately foist upon the text) because they are "pseudo" miracles (fake, pretend, illusory). They are real wonders which mislead people from the truth.

And thus the "supernatural power" behind the working of a miracle may be the living and true God whom people should worship and obey, but it might also be the Prince of Darkness, the Devil, who wishes to deceive men and lead them into soul-damning error. (Of course, as the book of Job teaches us, even the workings of Satan take place subject to the sovereign direction of God. Satan is not a genuinely autonomous power in the universe.)

[1] David Hume, "Of Miracles" in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Boobs-Merrill Co., [1748] 1955), p. 126.