

Evaluating Miracle Claims

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Probe's Michael Gleghorn demonstrates that not all miracle claims are equal. Although genuine miracles have occurred, a careful evaluation reveals that many claims are spurious.

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Are They Alien Events?

I recently spoke with a Christian woman who told me of the concern she felt for many of her family members who had embraced the doctrines of Christian Science. As we discussed how she might effectively communicate the gospel to those she loved, she mentioned one of the main difficulties she faced in getting a fair hearing. Apparently, some of her family members had been surprisingly healed of various physical ailments. And naturally enough, they interpreted these healings as confirming the truth of Christian Science.

What are we, as Christians, to make of such claims? Are they miracles? What are we to think about the many sincere people, holding vastly different beliefs, who claim to have personally experienced miracles? And what about many of the world's great religious traditions that claim support for their doctrines, at least in part, by an appeal to the miraculous? Should we assume that all such claims are false and that only Christian miracle claims are true? Or might some miracles have actually occurred outside a Judeo-Christian context? Are there any criteria we can apply in evaluating miracle claims to help us determine whether or not a miracle has actually occurred? And could there be other ways of explaining such claims besides recourse to the miraculous?

Before we attempt to answer such questions, we must first agree on what a

“miracle” is. Although various definitions have been used in the past, we will rely on a definition given by Richard Purtill. “A miracle is an event brought about by the power of God that is a temporary exception to the ordinary course of nature for the purpose of showing that God has acted in history.” [{1}](#) A miracle, then, requires a personal, supernatural being who is capable of intervening in nature to bring about an effect that would otherwise not have occurred.

If this is what miracles are, then some religions have no real way of accounting for them. Take Christian Science for instance. “The Christian Science view of God is impersonal and *pantheistic*.” [{2}](#) In this system, “miracles” can be nothing more than “divinely natural” events. [{3}](#) But if a true miracle requires the intervention of a personal being who is beyond nature, then Christian Science has no place for such events because it does not admit the existence of such a being. As David Clark has stated: “Pantheism has no category labeled ‘free act by a divine person.’ So miracles are as alien to all forms of pantheism as they are to atheism.” [{4}](#) Thus, far from demonstrating the truth of Christian Science, a genuine miracle would actually demonstrate its falsity! While such events may still have occurred, they can hardly be used as evidence in support of such traditions

Are They Legendary Events?

Apollonius of Tyana was, like Jesus, a traveling first century teacher. Like Jesus, he is credited with having performed a variety of miraculous feats. He is said to have healed the sick, cast out demons and predicted the future. He is even said to have raised the dead!

In a fascinating passage from his biography we read the following:

A girl had died...and the whole of Rome was mourning...Apollonius...witnessing their grief, said: ‘Put down the bier, for I will stay the tears that you are shedding for this maiden’....The crowd...thought that he was about to deliver...an oration...but merely touching

her and whispering in secret some spell over her, at once woke up the maiden from her seeming death..." [{5}](#)

Readers familiar with the Gospel of Luke will recognize that this story is quite similar to the account of Jesus raising the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). But isn't it inconsistent for Christians to affirm that Jesus really did perform such a miracle while denying the same for Apollonius? Not necessarily.

Suppose that the story about Apollonius is merely legendary, while the story about Jesus is truly historical. If that were so, then it would clearly make sense for Christians to deny that Apollonius raised someone from the dead while simultaneously affirming that Jesus really did perform such a feat. There are actually good reasons for believing that this is in fact the case.

Norman Geisler draws a number of significant contrasts between the evidence for Jesus and that for Apollonius. [{6}](#) First, the only source we have for the life of Apollonius comes from Philostratus. In contrast, we have numerous, independent sources of information about the life of Jesus. These include the four canonical gospels, many New Testament letters, and even extra-biblical references in writers like Tacitus, Josephus and others. Second, Philostratus wrote his biography about 120 years after Apollonius' death. The New Testament was written by those who were contemporaries and/or eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus. The point, of course, is that the further one gets from the original events, the more likely it is that accounts may become contaminated by later legendary developments. Third, Philostratus was commissioned to write his work by the wife of a Roman emperor, most likely as a means of countering the growing influence of Christianity. He thus had a motivation to embellish his account and make Apollonius appear to be the equal of Jesus. The New Testament writers, however, had no such motivation for embellishing the life of Jesus. Finally, Philostratus admits that the girl Apollonius allegedly raised may not have even been dead! [{7}](#) Luke, however, is quite clear that the widow's son was dead when Jesus raised him.

This brief comparison reveals that not all miracle claims are as historically well-attested as those of Jesus.

Are They Psychosomatic Events?

Amazing healings are among the most frequently cited miracle claims. Although many of these claims may be false, many are also true. But are they really miracles?

Some estimates indicate that up to 80 percent of disease is stress related. While such diseases are real, and really do afflict the body, they originate largely from negative mental attitudes, anxiety and other unhealthy emotions. For this reason, such diseases can often be healed through a reduction in stress, combined with positive mental attitudes and healthy emotions. But such healings should not be viewed as miracles because they do not involve God's direct, supernatural intervention.

If this is true, then we must carefully distinguish between psychosomatic events and those that are truly miraculous. Psychosomatic illnesses have psychological or emotional (rather than physiological) causes. Thus, people afflicted with such disorders may get better simply by coming to believe that they *can* get better. In other words, psychosomatic disorders can often be alleviated simply by faith—whether in God, a priest, a doctor, a pill, or a particular method of treatment. But there is nothing miraculous about this kind of healing. “It happens to Buddhists, Hindus, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and atheists. Healers claiming supernatural powers can do it, but so can...psychiatrists by purely natural powers...” [{9}](#) Obviously, healings of this sort cannot be used as evidence for a particular belief system because all belief systems can account for them.

But are there any differences between supernatural and psychological healings that might help us decide whether or not a particular healing was truly miraculous? Norman Geisler lists a number of important distinctions. [{10}](#) First,

supernatural healings do not require personal contact. Jesus occasionally healed people from a distance (John 4:46-54). In contrast, psychological healings often do require such contact, even if this simply involves laying one's hands on the television while an alleged faith-healer prays. Second, when a person is healed supernaturally there are no relapses. But relapses are common after psychological healings. Finally, a person can be healed of *any* condition by supernatural means, including organic diseases and major birth defects. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5) and restored the sight of one born blind (John 9). In contrast, not all conditions can be healed psychologically. Such methods are usually effective only in treating psychosomatic illnesses.

Thus, not every claim for miraculous healing is a genuine miracle. Only those healings that offer clear evidence of Divine intervention can fairly be considered miracles.

Are They Deceptive Events?

It appeared to be a miracle. The young man claimed he could see without an eye! Norman Geisler recounts an amazing demonstration he once witnessed in a seminary chapel back in the early 70s.[\[11\]](#) It involved a young man who had injured his left eye as a child. It was later surgically removed and replaced with a glass eye. For three years his father prayed, asking God to restore his son's vision. One day, his son excitedly announced that he could see with his glass eye! His father believed that God had worked a miracle. And apparently he wasn't the only one.

At the chapel service the young man's father shared how the physicians who had examined his son had confirmed that his vision had been restored despite the removal of the young man's eye! The demonstration seemed to prove that this was indeed the case. The young man's glass eye was removed and his good eye was covered with a blindfold that had been inspected by one of the students in the audience. After various items had been randomly collected from those in

attendance, the young man proceeded to read what was written on them! Needless to say, all who witnessed the performance were stunned by what appeared to be a genuine miracle. But was there another explanation? Although he initially thought that he had witnessed a miracle, Dr. Geisler later came to believe that he might have been deceived. But why?

It turns out that any skilled performer of magic tricks can do the very same thing. By applying some invisible lubricant to the cheek before a performance begins, the magician can have coins and clay placed over his eyes, along with a blindfold, and still read what has been handed to him. How is this possible? Dr. Geisler explains: "By lifting his forehead under the bandages, a small gap is made down the bridge of his nose through which he can see. It is not a miracle; it is magic." [{12}](#)

Since magic can often appear miraculous, we must carefully evaluate miracle claims for clear evidence of divine intervention. What are some differences between miracles and magic that may keep us from being deceived? [{13}](#)

First, miracles are of God and serve to glorify God. Magic is of man and usually serves to glorify the magician. Second, no deception is involved in miracles. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he was really dead, and had been for four days (John 11:39). But deception is an essential component of human magic. Finally, a miracle fits into nature in a way that magic does not. When Jesus healed the man born blind (John 9), He restored the proper function of his natural eyes. By contrast, in the story above the young man claimed to see without an eye at all! While one is clearly of God, the other is simply odd.

Are They Demonic Events?

The Bible affirms the existence of both Satan and demons, evil spirit beings with personal attributes who are united in their opposition to God and His plans for the world. Although vastly inferior to God, they still possess immense intelligence and

power. Is it possible that at least some of the apparently miraculous phenomena reported in the world's religions and the occult might be due to demonic spirits?

The book of Exodus seems to indicate that the Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate the first two plagues that God brought upon their land (Exod. 7:22; 8:7). How should this be explained? While some believe the magicians relied on human trickery, [{14}](#) others think that demonic spirits may have aided them. [{15}](#)

Although we cannot know for sure which view is correct, the demonic hypothesis is certainly possible. Indeed, the Bible elsewhere explicitly affirms the power of Satan and demons to perform amazing feats. For instance, Luke tells of a slave-girl "having a spirit of divination...who was bringing her masters much profit by fortunetelling" (Acts 16:16). Undoubtedly this was a demonic spirit for Luke records that Paul cast it out "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:18). This enraged the girl's masters because apparently, once the demon had been exorcised, the girl no longer retained her special powers (Acts 16:19).

In addition, Paul told the Thessalonians that the coming of the end-time ruler would be in "accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9). In Revelation 13 we read that Satan gives his power and authority to this wicked ruler, apparently even healing his otherwise fatal wound to the head (Rev. 13:3). Not only this, but the ruler's assistant is also said to perform "great signs" (v. 13). For instance, he is said to make fire come down from heaven and to give breath and the power of speech to an image of the ruler (vv. 13-15). The text implies that these wonders are accomplished through the power of Satan (v. 2).

This brief survey indicates that Satan and demonic spirits can indeed perform false signs and wonders that may initially appear to rival even genuinely Divine miracles. The book of Revelation tells us that the world of unregenerate humanity, deceived by such amazing signs, proceeds to worship both Satan and the ruler (Rev. 13:4). But how can we, as Christians, keep from being likewise deceived? In

his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts believers to put on “the full armor of God.” Among other things, this involves taking up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (see Eph. 6:10-17). If we have faith in Christ Jesus, and if we are protected by “the full armor of God,” we won’t be easily deceived by “the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).

Notes

1. Richard L. Purtill, “Defining Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Action in History*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 72.
2. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1990), 111.
3. Norman L. Geisler, in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. “Miracles, Magic and,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 476.
4. David K. Clark, “Miracles in the World Religions,” in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 203.
5. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F.C. Conybeare (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1912 [Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1]), 457-459, cited in Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 83.
6. Norman L. Geisler, in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v., “Apollonius of Tyana,” 44-45.
7. See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 85.
8. Kenneth Pelletier, *Christian Medical Society Journal* 11, no. 1 (1980), cited in Geisler, “Healings, Psychosomatic,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*,

301.

9. Norman L. Geisler, "Apollonius of Tyana," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 44-45.

10. Ibid., 118-122.

11. The story is told in Norman Geisler, *Signs and Wonders* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988), 59-60.

12. Ibid., 60.

13. I take these criteria from Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, 73-76.

14. See Dan Korem, *Powers: Testing the Psychic and Supernatural* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 172-176.

15. See John D. Hannah, "Exodus," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 118.

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