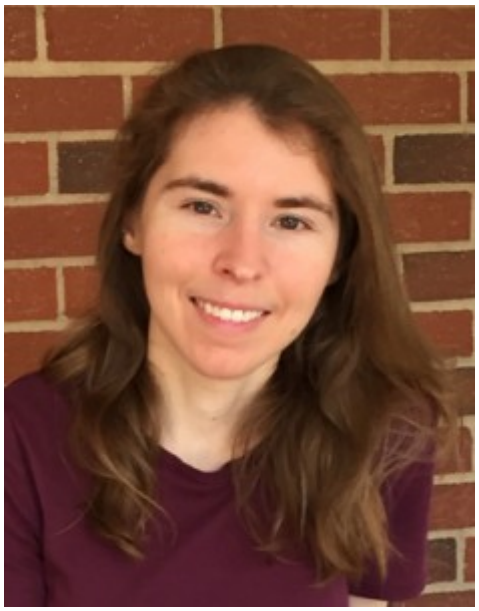
Is God Still Doing Miracles?

I asked Cara Polsley, author of the forthcoming book The Bible and the Holographic Universe, *to share her faith-building story that encourages me to ask big, bold prayers of a God who is still willing to do the miraculous.*



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"He is your praise, and He is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things which your eyes have seen" (Deut. 10:21, NKJV).

Moses spoke these words to Israel over 3,000 years ago. Fast-forwarding to today, I understand what he means. We don't always notice God moving. After all, not everyone crosses a sea on dry land or drinks water from a rock. But God is the same God, still doing miracles. When He does, it's a praise to share them.

That's why it's a praise to give you a glimpse of what the Lord has done for my family since a car accident almost killed us and left me paralyzed in 2013.

It was a beautiful summer day with barely a cloud in the sky, a perfect day for a family gathering. Seven of us were driving home on the highway. We'd had car trouble and were being followed miles behind by my father in a tow truck, but otherwise, it had been a happy morning.

The accident happened in an instant. A distracted driver began speeding. "That guy's going to hit us," my brother remembers thinking. The car rammed our bumper and sent our SUV flipping. We flipped about eight times before landing upside-down nearby. My oldest brother rolled onto the pavement. He was on his feet immediately, running after us. Even though he had been thrown out at fifty-five miles an hour, he was only scratched and bruised. Responding officers were incredulous. "Really, how'd you get here?" one asked. Today, my brother has a small scar on his arm.

Our youngest brother was also tossed out on impact. Fully aware, he stood up and walked around shakily until he felt dizzy. At the hospital, doctors found that his lower back had been broken and had then fused together on the spot. After a brief stint in ICU, he was released. He's now a thriving researcher, teacher, and graduate student, always on the go.

Our niece and nephew, five and three, were still fastened in their seats beside the broken windows. Neither child was admitted to the hospital or had any substantial injuries, even though my nephew spent several months blaming every bug bite and bruise on the accident.

God wasn't done. My father observed that photographs revealed a "bubble of protection" around my mother's place in the driver's seat. The glass and steering wheel in front of her was intact. Her neck and wrist were broken, and she had sustained a severe concussion. After some time in ICU and months of occupational therapy, Mom returned to a busy life working and being an exceptional wife, mother, and grandmother. Her hands dance across the piano keyboard without

a trace of injury, much less of a shattered wrist.

My sister-in-law, riding in the passenger seat, had four breaks in her arm. She was told that she would require surgery and that the arm would never be normal again. Four days later, she was in such terrible pain that she went to the local hospital. Her doctor “happened” to be leaving as she entered the ER, and was able to arrange rapid X-rays.

The orthopedic specialist soon came into the room and began unwrapping her arm. “What are you doing?” she exclaimed. “This arm has never been broken,” he said. “And I want to ask you, who grabbed your arm in the accident?” Her elbow bore a bruise shaped like a handprint with thumb and fingers from the outside, as if someone had clasped her elbow. No human had. We’d all been conscious; her window had been unbroken, and she’d crawled out without help.

I was thrown from the car and landed face-down in the grass. My lungs had collapsed. I couldn’t breathe and couldn’t feel my legs. There was an obvious spinal cord injury. An EMS worker named Luke—like the doctor in the Bible—“happened” to be driving home from work and stopped to help. He had special training in spinal injuries and called for a LifeFlight. I can honestly say that I had no fear in the accident or its aftermath. Jesus was with us every step of the way. “God, be with me,” I prayed, knowing He was.

Doctors said that if I survived 6+-hour surgery, I’d never walk again. My spinal cord had been severed. On a respirator, I couldn’t communicate until my sister-in-law interpreted my clumsy letters in sign language. Thankfully, my hands were uninjured, but my neck, back, and ribs had been crushed. Taking a breath, lifting a cup of water, sitting up—everything took effort.

At the end of in-patient rehabilitation, with a lot of assistance, I took six small steps at the parallel bars. Those

steps justified out-patient therapy. However, therapists soon determined that the progress was insufficient. “You’ll grow old in a wheelchair,” a well-meaning physical therapist said. “You may see small changes, but they won’t be significant.” Without significant changes, we had a problem. My Ph.D.’s first year had ended with a literal bang. Within the year, I had to resume studies or forfeit my fellowship at an Ivy League program halfway across the country. Additionally, every day off my feet threatened blood pressure issues, worse osteoporosis, and reduced function. How could school happen?

On January 1, 2014, God gave the idea of standing leaning against the kitchen sink (not recommended here). The first day, I stood propped against the counter for four minutes. Three months later, I’d worked up to fourteen hours a day, and was approved for knee-locking leg braces like those used by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Reviewers initially denied the request, but our clinician insisted on letting us try. While waiting, I practiced inching backward with full-length ACL braces and a rolling walker built by my father. A month later, I could go forward with actual braces.

In August 2014, living on prayer and family collaboration, Dad and I made the three-day drive back to school. I couldn’t get up or down from a chair, shuffle to campus in less than an hour, lift a laptop, or carry a book. However, the disabilities office and my academic department were part of God’s provision through countless obstacles. What they could not do, we innovated and prayed to accomplish. They provided a mobility scooter for transportation, placed a podium in each classroom so that I could stand during class, and arranged additional scanning on request through the library. Using a lightweight backpack with safety straps, I managed to carry a computer tablet that weighed about three pounds.

By spring, I was living independently with morning and evening support. One day, bringing home coursework that included a paper facsimile of a certain Egyptian artifact, I texted a

photo to my parents: “I just carried the Rosetta Stone!” The rigorous schedule combined teaching, classes, Ph.D. exams, and lectures—academic life—with demands of self-therapy at the gym, sleepless nights, health struggles, and, unwittingly, a broken ankle. But I was singing, loving how God was making things possible. “You believe in God,” a puzzled unbelieving friend observed, “and He is healing you.”

Two examples of His provision. On a high-nutrition diet, I prayed for fish and eggs. The cafeteria, open for select meals on weekdays, served more fish and eggs than usual that week. Later, realizing that the fridge held extra supplies, I randomly opened my Bible to Luke 11:11-13, reading, “[I]f (a son shall) ask a fish, will (his father) for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?” Another time, I fell at 3 a.m. No one was nearby. Pulling the wall-mounted emergency cord would summon noisy firetrucks. I asked the Lord to preserve the testimony by helping me onto my feet. To this day, it’s a mystery how I got up from the floor.

Christmas 2015 brought a devastating setback. We discovered that my leg was, as doctors said, “impressively” broken due to SCI-induced osteoporosis. After extensive surgery, I wrote my dissertation prospectus lying in bed with an external metal fixator bolted to the bones of my right leg. The leg recovered better than expected.

On the day that I was preparing to travel back to school, I fell. My left leg was now clearly broken. While God hadn’t prevented surgery on the right leg, we prayed. This was it. If He didn’t intervene, there wasn’t enough medical leave left in the Ph.D. program. If God wanted me to finish, He had to make a way.

We prayed for five minutes. At the end, my knee was completely healed, as if nothing had happened. After an hour, we got in the car and were on the road.

Ultimately, the Lord guided through the remainder of the Ph.D. Although officials were too nervous to have me walk across the stage during graduation ceremonies, I walked across it before the diploma ceremony began. It was all Jesus.

I still do hours of walking with braces each day, and am still paralyzed. Nothing is what you would call normal. I believe more is coming, and pray and work toward it, as God wills. Meanwhile, He's opened doors for writing, teaching, speaking, and more. He continues to do miracles. Though they are not always as expected, His glory and His mercy are everywhere. Sometimes He makes our dependency plainer than others. In those times, it's especially humbling. Still, isn't salvation the greatest miracle, and isn't abundant Christian life meant to testify to God's glory (Col. 3:23-24)?

As Moses said, God is all about "great and awesome things." I praise Him for the opportunity to share some wonders that these eyes have seen, and pray that my story, His story, encourages you to watch for Him actively every day—and to realize that He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/is-god-still-doing-miracles/ on March 15, 2022.

The Apologetics of Jesus: A Defense of His Deity

Dr. Zukeran shows us that the greatest defense of the deity of Jesus was made by Jesus Himself. Claiming to be God in the flesh, His words and His actions had to be an apologetic for His claim. People could see He was a man; He had to prove to them that He was also deity, God in the flesh.



Jesus was one of the greatest leaders, teachers, and remarkable individuals that ever lived, but few realize that Jesus was also the greatest apologist. Apologetics is the rational defense of Christianity. Christian apologists use reason and evidence to present a convincing case for Christianity, challenge unbelief, expose errors, and defend the message of the gospel. Apologetics was an essential part of Jesus' ministry. If it was important in His ministry, it certainly should be in all ministries looking to impact the unbelieving world for Christ.

The Bible commands us in 1 Peter 3:15, "But set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have." We are commanded to provide a well-reasoned answer for our faith in Christ to an unbelieving world. Jesus commanded us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Mt. 22:37). Apologetics involves knowing why you believe and complies with Christ's command of loving God with your mind.

There exists some misunderstanding among Christians as to whether apologetics is necessary. Some believe that our belief in Christ is based on "faith" and thus does not require solid reasons or evidence to support it. Therefore, in witnessing to unbelievers, some mistakenly suppose that apologetics is ineffective in leading anyone to faith. The call of the Christian is to simply present the gospel, and the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures will do the rest. However, this was not the example of Christ.

Christ made extraordinary claims to be the divine Son of God. He made such claims as being the source of life, forgiver of sins, the embodiment of truth, and authority over the Old Testament Law. Such claims were met with skepticism, doubt, and hostility. Jesus knew He was making remarkable claims, and He did not expect people to simply believe His message without

good reasons. He was not seeking or wanting people to exercise "blind faith." Jesus understood that we are rational and moral beings, for we are created in the image of God who is a rational and morally perfect being. For this reason, we exercise our rational capacity and investigate the evidence before making decisions.

Christ knew He would have to make a convincing case to uphold His claims and He did. Throughout His ministry, Christ presented compelling reasons and evidence to uphold His claim to be the divine Son of God. Jesus' apologetics included the testimony of witnesses, miracles, the resurrection, prophecy, reason, the use of parables and more. The apologetic methods of Jesus serve as a model for every believer who desires to engage and impact an unbelieving world for Christ.

The Testimony of Witnesses

A man ill for thirty-eight years lay beside the Pool of Bethesda along with a multitude of crippled individuals. Suddenly an unknown stranger walks up and asks him a strange question. "Do you want to get well?" As the lame man begins to explain his situation, the stranger orders the man to "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!" Immediately, strength enters his legs and he rises and walks, carrying his mat as the stranger orders. Soon afterwards the Pharisees arrive and an examination ensues.

What should have been a moment of rejoicing turns into a serious interrogation. The Jewish leaders in John 5 confront Jesus seeking an opportunity and reason to kill Him. Instead of praising God in the healing of the lame man, the focus of the Jewish leaders is on the apparent violation of their Jewish tradition by Jesus.

Jesus responded saying, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working." (Jn. 5:17). The following verse states, "For this reason, the Jews tried all

the harder to kill Him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." (Jn. 5:18). In this chapter Jesus performed some remarkable feats and made some extraordinary claims. When questioned, Jesus gave an answer or an *apologia,* a defense of His work and character. In His answer, we see that He was the greatest apologist and that apologetics was a key component in the ministry of Jesus.

In the passage that follows, Jesus presents one of the clearest and strongest cases regarding His nature as the divine Son of God. New Testament scholar Leon Morris states, "Nowhere in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this discourse."{1}

What was the apologetic method Jesus used in this instance? Jesus' apologetic involved the testimony of witnesses. According to Jewish law, a testimony is valid only if there were at least two witnesses who could testify to the truth of an individual's claims (Deut. 19:15). Jesus knew these men needed solid testimony to confirm His claims but also testimony that would convict them of their error regarding their understanding of His identity.

Jesus brings forth five witnesses that testify on His behalf; John the Baptist (5:32-35), His works (5:36), the Father (5:37), the Old Testament Scriptures (5:39-40), and Moses (5:41-46). There were no more authoritative witnesses than these. In a brilliant presentation, Jesus makes His case. The testimony of witnesses was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

Apologetics in the Parables

It is a well-known fact that Jesus was a great storyteller. His stories captivated the audience and taught a valuable

lesson. The term “good Samaritan” and “the prodigal Son,” are recognized all over the world because of the unforgettable stories told by Jesus. One of the best ways to communicate truth is to illustrate it through stories which are also an effective way to penetrate into hardened hearts that would not be receptive to a direct gospel presentation. The parables of Christ are some of the most remarkable lessons ever taught. However, did you know that the parables of Christ were also powerful apologetic presentations of our Lord?

Through the use of these stories, Jesus makes a declaration and a defense of His ministry and claims. The images He selects are used in the Old Testament and later Jewish literature in reference to God. Jesus uses these images and applies them often to Himself. Philip Payne states, “Out of the fifty-two recorded narrative parables, twenty depict Him in imagery which in the Old Testament typically referred to God. The frequency with which this occurs indicates that Jesus regularly depicted Himself in images which were particularly appropriate for depicting God.”{2}

By applying these images to Himself Jesus indicates his self-understanding as the divine Son of God and was communicating this truth to His audience. Payne identifies ten prominent images used in the parables in which images used in reference to God in the Old Testament Jesus applies to Himself.{3} Jesus’ repeated use of such images indicates He wanted His audience to recognize His divinity and that He was carrying out the very will of God in His ministry on earth.

Here are a few examples where Christ declares His divinity in the gospels. The image of the rock is used to describe God, especially in the Psalms (Ps. 19:14, 28:1, 42:9, 61:2, 62:2, 71:3, 78:35). In the parables of Jesus, He states that those who build their lives upon His teachings have built their lives upon “a rock” (Matt. 7:24-26 and Lk. 6:46-49). In Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, God is portrayed as a shepherd. In John 10 Jesus identifies Himself as the good shepherd. In another

parable, Jesus uses the example of a bridegroom. In Isaiah 49, 54, Jeremiah 2, and Hosea, God is pictured as a bridegroom. In Mk. 2:19, Matt. 9:15, and Lk. 5:34-35, Jesus identifies Himself as the bridegroom. The parables were powerful stories Jesus used to communicate truth but they were also part of the apologetics of Jesus.

The Use of Reason

Jesus commanded us to "Love the Lord your God with all your . . . mind" (Mt. 22:37). Jesus exemplified what it meant to love God with "all your mind." He was the greatest thinker who ever set foot upon the earth. Philosopher Dallas Willard states,

> We need to understand that Jesus is a thinker, that this is not a dirty word but an essential work, and that his other attributes do not preclude thought, but only insure that he is certainly the greatest thinker of the human race: 'the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth.' He constantly uses the power of logical insight to enable people to come to the truth about themselves and about God from the inside of their own heart and mind.{4}

Jesus understood that we are created in the image of God. Our creator is a reasonable and rational being. We are thus endowed with the capacity for reason and rationality. In Isaiah 1:18, God invited Israel saying, "Come now let us reason together." God wanted the people of Israel to use their ability to reason and consider the consequences of their behavior.

Jesus showed Himself to be a brilliant apologist who used the laws of logic to reveal truth, demolish arguments, and point out error. The communication of truth and discerning error requires the use of reason. Since our faith is a reasonable faith, reason was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

An example of the use of reason is found in Matthew 12:22-28.

Here the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the Devil. Through the use of reason, Jesus showed their accusation to be false. The argument He used is the argument known as *reductio ad absurdum* [Latin for "reduction to the absurd"]. This is an argument that demonstrates if the primary premise is supposed to be true, then it leads to a contradiction that is absurd. One would then inevitably have to conclude that the original premise is false.

Jesus responded stating that "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?" Jesus points to the illogical nature of their accusation and further points to the testimony of His miracles that confirm His authority being from God.

Apologetics of Miracles

Something had gone terribly wrong. The Messiah had arrived but the Kingdom, which would be characterized by liberty, freedom, and the just rule of God, had not arrived. Instead, John the Baptist found himself in prison awaiting execution. Confused and discouraged, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Lk. 7:20). Jesus responds by pointing to the testimony of His miracles: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Lk. 7:22-23). When asked by John if He was indeed the Messiah, Jesus defends His claim by pointing to the testimony of His miracles. Miracles represent another component in the apologetics of Jesus.

A miracle is a special act of God that interrupts the normal course of events. Natural laws describe what occurs regularly

by natural causes, but miracles describe what happens rarely, by supernatural causes. A miracle is an act of God designed to confirm the word of God through a messenger of God.{5}

Throughout the Old Testament, God used miracles to confirm His message and His messenger. Christ's miracles demonstrated that what He claimed about Himself was true and that God's confirming hand was on the message He preached. Jesus performed a vast array of miraculous signs that demonstrated His divine authority over every realm of creation.

When friendly as well as hostile audiences questioned Jesus, He defended His claims with the testimony of miracles (Mk. 2:1-12, Jn. 2, and 10:22-42). Many who witnessed Christ's miracles made the connection. Nathaniel, witnessing the omniscience of Christ, responded exclaiming, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." (Jn. 1:49). Nicodemus in his evening visit meets Jesus saying, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." (Jn. 3:2).

When Christ establishes His kingdom, all creation will be subject to Him. Sin, sickness, death, and disease will be overcome and the subjects of the kingdom will never be in want. The miracles of Christ reflect His divine character and demonstrate the King of the Kingdom has arrived.

Apologetics was an essential component of Christ's ministry and should be an important part of any ministry looking to engage this lost world for Christ. The Bible commands us to defend our faith, and Christ set the supreme example for us to follow.

To learn more about the apologetics of Jesus and gain valuable practical lessons from His examples, check out the online store at Probe.org and purchase a copy of the in depth book, *The Apologetics of Jesus* written by Norman Geisler and myself.

Notes

1. Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 311.
2. Philip Payne, "Interpreting Jesus' Parables," (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1980), 263.
3. Ibid., 313-17.
4. Dallas Willard, "Jesus the Logician," *Christian Scholars Review* (Summer 1999): 610.
5. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 201-2.

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The Historical Reliability of the Gospels – An Important Apologetic for Christianity

Dr. Pat Zukeran provides a succinct argument for the reliability of our current copies of the four gospels. This data is an important part of any apologetic argument, i.e. defense of the veracity of the Christian faith.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Differences Between the Four Gospels

Skeptics have criticized the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, as being legendary in nature rather than historical. They point to alleged contradictions between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They also maintain the Gospels

were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The late date of the writings allowed legends and exaggerations to proliferate, they say.

Are the Gospels historical or mythological?

The first challenge to address is how to account for the differences among the four Gospels. They are each different in nature, content, and the facts they include or exclude. The reason for the variations is that each author wrote to a different audience and from his own unique perspective. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to prove to them that Jesus is indeed their Messiah. That's why Matthew includes many of the teachings of Christ and makes numerous references to Old Testament prophecies. Mark wrote to a Greek or Gentile audience to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. Therefore, he makes his case by focusing on the events of Christ's life. His gospel moves very quickly from one event to another, demonstrating Christ's lordship over all creation. Luke wrote to give an accurate historical account of Jesus' life. John wrote after reflecting on his encounter with Christ for many years. With that insight, near the end of his life John sat down and wrote the most theological of all the Gospels.

We should expect some differences between four independent accounts. If they were identical, we would suspect the writers of collaboration with one another. Because of their differences, the four Gospels actually give us a fuller and richer picture of Jesus.

Let me give you an example. Imagine if four people wrote a biography on your life: your son, your father, a co-worker, and a good friend. They would each focus on different aspects of your life and write from a unique perspective. One would be writing about you as a parent, another as a child growing up, one as a professional, and one as a peer. Each may include different stories or see the same event from a different angle, but their differences would not mean they are in error.

When we put all four accounts together, we would get a richer picture of your life and character. That is what is taking place in the Gospels.

So we acknowledge that differences do not necessarily mean errors. Skeptics have made allegations of errors for centuries, yet the vast majority of charges have been answered. New Testament scholar, Dr. Craig Blomberg, writes, "Despite two centuries of skeptical onslaught, it is fair to say that all the alleged inconsistencies among the Gospels have received at least plausible resolutions."{1} Another scholar, Murray Harris, emphasizes, "Even then the presence of discrepancies in circumstantial detail is no proof that the central fact is unhistorical."{2} The four Gospels give us a complementary, not a contradictory, account.

The Date of the New Testament Writings: Internal Evidence

Critics claim that the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. This would allow for myths about Jesus' life to proliferate. Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses as they claim, or were they written centuries later? The historical facts appear to make a strong case for a first century date.

Jesus' ministry was from A.D. 27-30. Noted New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, gives strong evidence that the New Testament was completed by A.D. 100.{3} Most writings of the New Testament works were completed twenty to forty years before this. The Gospels are dated traditionally as follows: Mark is believed to be the first gospel written around A.D. 60. Matthew and Luke follow and are written between A.D. 60-70; John is the final gospel, written between A.D. 90-100.

The internal evidence supports these early dates for several reasons. The first three Gospels prophesied the fall of the Jerusalem Temple which occurred in A.D. 70. However, the

fulfillment is not mentioned. It is strange that these three Gospels predict this major event but do not record it happening. Why do they not mention such an important prophetic milestone? The most plausible explanation is that it had not yet occurred at the time Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written.

In the book of Acts, the Temple plays a central role in the nation of Israel. Luke writes as if the Temple is an important part of Jewish life. He also ends Acts on a strange note: Paul living under house arrest. It is strange that Luke does not record the death of his two chief characters, Peter and Paul. The most plausible reason for this is that Luke finished writing Acts before Peter and Paul's martyrdom in A.D. 64. A significant point to highlight is that the Gospel of Luke precedes Acts, further supporting the traditional dating of A.D. 60. Furthermore, most scholars agree Mark precedes Luke, making Mark's Gospel even earlier.

Finally, the majority of New Testament scholars believe that Paul's epistles are written from A.D. 48-60. Paul's outline of the life of Jesus matches that of the Gospels. 1 Corinthians is one of the least disputed books regarding its dating and Pauline authorship. In chapter 15, Paul summarizes the gospel and reinforces the premise that this is the same gospel preached by the apostles. Even more compelling is that Paul quotes from Luke's Gospel in 1 Timothy 5:18, showing us that Luke's Gospel was indeed completed in Paul's lifetime. This would move up the time of the completion of Luke's Gospel along with Mark and Matthew.

The internal evidence presents a strong case for the early dating of the Gospels.

The Date of the Gospels: External Evidence

Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses of the events, or were they not recorded until centuries later? As with the

internal evidence, the external evidence also supports a first century date.

Fortunately, New Testament scholars have an enormous amount of ancient manuscript evidence. The documentary evidence for the New Testament far surpasses any other work of its time. We have over 5000 manuscripts, and many are dated within a few years of their authors' lives.

Here are some key documents. An important manuscript is the Chester Beatty Papyri. It contains most of the N.T. writings, and is dated around A.D. 250.

The Bodmer Papyri contains most of John, and dates to A.D. 200. Another is the Rylands Papyri that was found in Egypt that contains a fragment of John, and dates to A.D. 130. From this fragment we can conclude that John was completed well before A.D. 130 because, not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand copied and make its way down from Greece to Egypt. Since the vast majority of scholars agree that John is the last gospel written, we can affirm its first century date along with the other three with greater assurance.

A final piece of evidence comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls Cave 7. Jose Callahan discovered a fragment of the Gospel of Mark and dated it to have been written in A.D. 50. He also discovered fragments of Acts and other epistles and dated them to have been written slightly after A.D. 50.{4}

Another line of evidence is the writings of the church fathers. Clement of Rome sent a letter to the Corinthian church in A.D. 95. in which he quoted from the Gospels and other portions of the N.T. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter before his martyrdom in Rome in A.D. 115, quoting all the Gospels and other N.T. letters. Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in A.D. 120 and quoted from the Gospels and N.T. letters. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) quotes John 3. Church

fathers of the early second century were familiar with the apostle's writings and quoted them as inspired Scripture.

Early dating is important for two reasons. The closer a historical record is to the date of the event, the more likely the record is accurate. Early dating allows for eyewitnesses to still be alive when the Gospels were circulating to attest to their accuracy. The apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing to their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, 26:26). Also, the time is too short for legends to develop. Historians agree it takes about two generations, or eighty years, for legendary accounts to establish themselves.

From the evidence, we can conclude the Gospels were indeed written by the authors they are attributed to.

How Reliable was the Oral Tradition?

Previously, I defended the early dating of the Gospels. Despite this early dating, there is a time gap of several years between the ascension of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. There is a period during which the gospel accounts were committed to memory by the disciples and transmitted orally. The question we must answer is, Was the oral tradition memorized and passed on accurately? Skeptics assert that memory and oral tradition cannot accurately preserve accounts from person to person for many years.

The evidence shows that in oral cultures where memory has been trained for generations, oral memory can accurately preserve and pass on large amounts of information. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reveals to us how important oral instruction and memory of divine teaching was stressed in Jewish culture. It is a well-known fact that the rabbis had the O.T. and much of the oral law committed to memory. The Jews placed a high value on memorizing whatever wri ting reflected inspired Scripture and the wisdom of God. I studied under a Greek professor who had

the Gospels memorized word perfect. In a culture where this was practiced, memorization skills were far advanced compared to ours today. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock states that the Jewish culture was "a culture of memory."{5}

Rainer Reisner presents six key reasons why oral tradition accurately preserved Jesus' teachings.{6} First, Jesus used the Old Testament prophets' practice of proclaiming the word of God which demanded accurate preservation of inspired teaching. Second, Jesus' presentations of Himself as Messiah would reinforce among His followers the need to preserve His words accurately. Third, ninety percent of Jesus' teachings and sayings use mnemonic methods similar to those used in Hebrew poetry. Fourth, Jesus trained His disciples to teach His lessons even while He was on earth. Fifth, Jewish boys were educated until they were twelve, so the disciples likely knew how to read and write. Finally, just as Jewish and Greek teachers gathered disciples, Jesus gathered and trained His to carry on after His death.

When one studies the teachings of Jesus, one realizes that His teachings and illustrations are easy to memorize. People throughout the world recognize immediately the story of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Lord's Prayer.

We also know that the church preserved the teachings of Christ in the form of hymns which were likewise easy to memorize. Paul's summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is a good example of this.

We can have confidence then that the oral tradition accurately preserved the teachings and the events of Jesus' life till they were written down just a few years later.

The Transmission of the Gospel Texts

When I am speaking with Muslims or Mormons, we often come to a point in the discussion where it is clear the Bible

contradicts their position. It is then they claim, as many skeptics, do that the Bible has not been accurately transmitted and has been corrupted by the church. In regards to the Gospels, do we have an accurate copy of the original texts or have they been corrupted?

Previously, we showed that the Gospels were written in the first century, within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. These eyewitnesses, both friendly and hostile, scrutinized the accounts for accuracy.

So the original writings were accurate. However, we do not have the original manuscripts. What we have are copies of copies of copies. Are these accurate, or have they been tampered with? As shown earlier, we have 5000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. When you include the quotes from the church fathers, manuscripts from other early translations like the Latin Vulgate, the Ethiopic text, and others, the total comes out to over 24,000 ancient texts. With so many ancient texts, significant alterations should be easy to spot. However, those who accuse the New Testament of being corrupted have not produced such evidence. This is significant because it should be easy to do with so many manuscripts available. The truth is, the large number of manuscripts confirm the accurate preservation and transmission of the New Testament writings.

Although we can be confident in an accurate copy, we do have textual discrepancies. There are some passages with variant readings that we are not sure of. However, the differences are minor and do not affect any major theological doctrine. Most have to do with sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar. These in no way affect any major doctrine.

Here is one example. In our Bibles, Mark 16:9-20 is debated as to whether it was part of the original writings. Although I personally do not believe this passage was part of the original text, its inclusion does not affect any major

teaching of Christianity. It states that Christ was resurrected, appeared to the disciples, and commissioned them to preach the gospel. This is taught elsewhere.

The other discrepancies are similar in nature. Greek scholars agree we have a copy very accurate to the original. Westcott and Hort state that we have a copy 98.33% accurate to the original.{7} A.T. Robertson gave a figure of 99% accuracy to the original.{8} As historian Sir Fredric Kenyon assures us, "…the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."{9}

Do Miracles Discredit the Gospels?

Skeptics question the accuracy of the Gospels because of the miracles. However, this is an issue of worldviews. Those who hold to a naturalistic worldview do not believe an omnipotent creator exists. All that exists is energy and matter. Therefore, miracles are impossible. Their conclusion, then, is that the miracle accounts in the Gospels are exaggerations or myths.

Those who hold to a theistic worldview can accept miracles in light of our understanding of God and Christ. God can intervene in time and space and alter the natural regularities of nature much like finite humans can in smaller limited ways. If Jesus is the Son of God, we can expect Him to perform miracles to affirm His claims to be divine. But worldviews are not where this ends. We also need to take a good look at the historical facts.

As shown previously, the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses to the events of the life of Christ. Early dating shows eyewitnesses were alive when Gospels were circulating and could attest to their accuracy. Apostles often appeal to the

witness of the hostile crowd, pointing out their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, Acts 26:26). Therefore, if there were any exaggerations or stories being told about Christ that were not true, the eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the apostles accounts. Remember, they began preaching in Israel in the very cities and during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The Jews were careful to record accurate historical accounts. Many enemies of the early church were looking for ways to discredit the apostles' teaching. If what the apostles were saying was not true, the enemies would have cried foul, and the Gospels would not have earned much credibility.

There are also non-Christian sources that attest to the miracles of Christ. Josephus writes, "Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles." The Jewish Talmud, written in the fifth century A.D., attributes Jesus' miracles to sorcery. Opponents of the Gospels do not deny He did miracles, they just present alternative explanations for them.

Finally, Christ's power over creation is supremely revealed in the resurrection. The resurrection is one of the best attested to events in history. For a full treatment, look up the article *Resurrection: Fact or Fiction* here at Probe.org.

Notes

1. Craig Blomberg, The *Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 10.

2. Ibid., 9.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 14.

4. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian*

Apologetics, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002), 530.
5. Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 80.

6. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* 27-28.

7. Geisler, 474.

8. Ibid.

9. Quoted by Norman Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 405.

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Hume's Critique of Miracles

Michael Gleghorn examines Hume's influential critique of miracles and points out the major shortfalls in his argument. Hume's first premise assumes that there could not be miracles and his second premise is based on his distaste for the societies that report miracles. As a Christian examining these arguments, we find little of value to convince us to reject a biblical worldview saying that God can and has intervened in natural history to perform miracles.

Introduction

One of the most influential critiques of miracles ever written came from the pen of the skeptical Scottish philosopher David Hume. The title of the essay, "Of Miracles," originally appeared in Hume's larger work, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1748. This was the Age of Enlightenment, a time in which skepticism about miracles was becoming increasingly widespread among the educated elite.{1}

So what were Hume's arguments, and why have they been so influential in subsequent scholarly discussions of this topic?



Hume essentially "presents a two-pronged assault against miracles."{2} He first argues that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature." But since "a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle," he says, "is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."{3} In other words, given the regularity of the laws of nature, Hume contends that miracles are exceedingly improbable events. But this is not all. He also argues that since miracle reports typically occur among uneducated, barbarous peoples, they are inherently untrustworthy and, hence, unworthy of our belief.{4}

Now clearly, if Hume is correct, then this presents a real problem for Christianity. For Christianity is full of miracles. According to the New Testament, Jesus walked on water, calmed raging storms, healed diseases, exorcised demons, and brought the dead back to life! But if miracles are really as utterly improbable as Hume maintains, and if reports of miracles are completely lacking in credibility, then it would seem that the New Testament's accounts of miracles are probably unreliable and that Christianity itself is almost certainly false!

So how compelling are Hume's arguments? Should believers be quaking in their boots, fearful that their most cherished beliefs are a lie? Not at all! As philosopher of science John Earman observed in a scholarly critique of Hume's arguments, Hume's essay is not merely a failure; it is "an abject failure." He continues, "Most of Hume's considerations are unoriginal, warmed over versions of arguments that are found in the writings of predecessors and contemporaries. And the parts of 'Of Miracles' that set Hume apart do not stand up to scrutiny. Worse still, the essay reveals the weakness and the poverty of Hume's own account of induction and probabilistic

reasoning. And to cap it all off, the essay represents the kind of overreaching that gives philosophy a bad name."{5} Now admittedly, these are strong words. But Earman argues his case quite forcefully and persuasively. And in the remainder of this article, I think the truth of his remarks will become increasingly evident.

Hume's Argument from the Laws of Nature

What are we to say to Hume's argument that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature" and that "the proof against a miracle…is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined"?

First, we might question whether miracles *should* be defined as violations of the laws of nature. According to Christian philosopher Bill Craig, "An examination of the chief competing schools of thought concerning the notion of a natural law…reveals that on each theory the concept of a violation of a natural law is incoherent and that miracles need not be so defined."{6} Thus, we might object that Hume's definition of a miracle is simply incoherent. But this is a debated point, so let's instead turn our attention to a more pressing matter.

When Hume says that the laws of nature are established upon "a firm and unalterable experience," is he claiming that the laws of nature are never violated? If so, then his argument begs the question, assuming the very thing that needs to be proved. It would be as if he argued this way:

- *A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.*
- *Experience teaches us that the laws of nature are never violated (i.e. that miracles never occur).*
- *Therefore, experience teaches us that miracles never occur.*

Such an argument is clearly fallacious. Hume would be assuming

"as a premise for his argument the very conclusion he intends to prove."{7} But this is probably *not* what Hume intended.

As Earman observes, Hume's view rather seems to go something like this: "When uniform experience supports" some lawlike regularity "that is contradicted by testimony," then one must set "proof against proof," and judge which of the two is more likely. The result of this new formulation, however, is that "uniform experience does *not* furnish a proof against a miracle in the sense of making the . . . probability of its occurrence flatly zero."{8}

This is an important point. After all, there is a great deal of human testimony that solemnly *affirms* the occurrence of miracles. Thus, the only way that Hume can maintain that the uniform experience of mankind is against the occurrence of miracles is by *assuming* that all miracle reports are false. But *this* assumption, as we'll see, is completely untenable when miraculous events are attested by numerous, independent witnesses.

Hume's Argument Against the Reliability of Human Testimony

In Part II of "Of Miracles," David Hume argues that there has never been the kind of testimony on behalf of miracles which would "amount to entire proof."{9} He offers four reasons for this claim.{10}

First, no miracle on record has a sufficient number of intelligent witnesses, of good moral character, who testify to a miraculous event that occurred in public and in a civilized part of the world. Second, human beings love bizarre and fantastic tales, and this irrationally inclines them to accept such tales as true. Third, miracle reports are usually found among barbarous peoples. And finally, the miracle reports of different religions cancel each other out, thus making none of them effective for proving the truth of their doctrines.

What should we say in response to these arguments? While all of the points have merit, nevertheless, as Bill Craig observes, "these general considerations cannot be used to decide the historicity of any particular miracle."{11} The only way to determine if a miracle has actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence. How many witnesses were there? Are they known to be honest, or are they generally unreliable?

These questions are particularly important when one considers the cumulative power of independent witnesses for establishing the occurrence of some highly improbable event like a miracle. By "independent witnesses" I simply mean witnesses whose testimony to an event comes from firsthand experience and is *not dependent* on the testimony of others.

As Charles Babbage demonstrated in his *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, if one can find enough independent witnesses to a miraculous event, who tell the truth more often than not, then one can always show that the occurrence of the miracle is more probable than not.{12} Craig explains the matter this way: "If two witnesses are each 99% reliable, then the odds of their both independently testifying falsely to some event are only . . . one out of 10,000; the odds of three such witnesses being wrong is . . . one out of 1,000,000." "In fact," he says, "the cumulative power of independent witnesses is such that individually they could be *un*reliable more than 50% of the time and yet their testimony combine to make an event of apparently enormous improbability quite probable in light of their testimony."{13}

So while Hume's arguments should make us cautious, they cannot prevent human testimony from plausibly establishing the occurrence of miracles. And the only way to determine if the testimony *is* plausible is to carefully examine the evidence.

Hume and Probability Theory (Part 1)

Hume argues that since miracles run contrary to man's uniform experience of the laws of nature, no testimony can establish that a miracle has occurred unless "its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."{14} Although Hume makes it sound as though establishing one miracle would require an even greater miracle, all his statement really amounts to, as John Earman rightly notes, is that no testimony is good enough to establish that a miracle has occurred unless it's sufficient to make the occurrence of the miracle more probable than not.{15}

But in Hume's view this is virtually impossible. *No* testimony is really ever sufficient to establish that a miracle has occurred. And this is problematic. For it can be perfectly reasonable to accept a highly improbable event on the basis of human testimony. In fact, we do it all the time.

Suppose the evening news announces that the number picked in the lottery was 8253652. As Craig observes, "this is a report of an extraordinarily improbable event, one out of several million."{16} If we applied Hume's principle to such a case, it would be irrational for us to believe that such a highly improbable event had actually occurred. So something is clearly wrong with this principle. But what?

The problem, says Craig, is that Hume has not considered all of the relevant probabilities. For although it might be highly improbable that just this number should have been chosen out of all the possible numbers that *could* have been chosen, nevertheless one must also consider the probability that the evening news would have reported just *this* number if that number had *not* been chosen. And this probability is "incredibly small," for the newscasters would have no reason to report just this number unless it had, in fact, been chosen!{17}

So how does this relate to the question of miracles? When it comes to assessing the testimony for a miracle, we cannot simply consider the likelihood of the event in light of our general knowledge of the world.{18} This was Hume's mistake. Instead, we must also consider how likely it would be, if the miracle had *not* occurred, that we would have just the testimony and evidence that we have.{19} And if it is highly unlikely that we would have just this evidence if the miracle had *not* occurred, then it may actually be *highly probable* that the miracle did, in fact, occur. Even if a miracle is highly *improbable* when judged against our general knowledge, it may still turn out to be highly *probable* once all the specific testimony and evidence for the miracle is taken into account.{20}

Hume and Probability Theory (Part 2)

There's still another problem with Hume's critique, namely, that he never actually establishes that a miracle *is* highly improbable in light of our general knowledge of the world. He simply assumes that this is so. But the problem with this becomes evident when one reflects upon the fact that, for the Christian, part of what's included in our "general knowledge of the world" is the belief that God exists. What's more, as believers we have at our disposal a whole arsenal of arguments which, we contend, make it far more plausible than not that this belief is really true.

But notice how this will influence our estimation of the probability of miracles. If belief in God is part of our general knowledge of the world, then miracles will be judged to at least be possible. For if an all-powerful God exists, then He is certainly capable of intervening in the natural world to bring about events which would never have occurred had nature been left to itself. In other words, if God exists, then He can bring about miracles! Thus, as Bill Craig observes, whether or not a miracle is considered highly

improbable relative to our general knowledge of the world is largely going to depend on whether or not we believe in God. So the question of God's existence is highly relevant when it comes to assessing the probability of miracle claims.{21} While those who believe in God may still be skeptical of most miracle reports, they will nonetheless be open to the *possibility* of miracles, and they will be willing to examine the evidence of such reports on a case-by-case basis.

To conclude, although Hume's critique of miracles is one of the most influential ever written, it really doesn't stand up well under scrutiny. Indeed, John Earman concludes his devastating critique of Hume's arguments by noting his astonishment at how well posterity has treated Hume's essay, "given how completely the confection collapses under a little probing."{22} Although Hume was doubtless a brilliant man, his critique of miracles is simply unconvincing.

Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 248.

2. Ibid., 250.

3. David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 122.

4. Ibid. See Hume's discussion in Part II of his essay.

5. John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

6. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 261.

7. Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 65.

8. Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 32

9. Hume, “Of Miracles,” 124.

10. See ibid., 124-41.

11. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 277.

12. This sentence is a paraphrase of a statement from Babbage’s treatise cited in Earman, Hume’s Abject Failure, 54.

13. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 272, n. 26.

14. Hume, “Of Miracles,” 122-23.

15. Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure*, 41.

16. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 270.

17. Ibid., 271.

18. Jason Rennie, “Epistemology and the Resurrection: An Interview with William Lane Craig,” in Sci-Phi Show Outcasts, 2006, available in the “Interviews” section at bit.ly/9SSrWU (note: this page is accessible by members only. We urge you to register free of charge to access this and many excellent resources. The link is down the page underneath the “Closer to Truth” links.)

19. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 270.

20. Rennie, “Epistemology and the Resurrection.”

21. Ibid. See also the discussion in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 274-76.

22. Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure*, 71.

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Humanitarian Aid

dear world,

if i’m just a walking sac of chemicals,
then there’s no such thing as miracles
and caring isn’t caring; just synapses
flaring—so tell me, why should i care?

movies end happily, but i can’t for the life of me
understand—if God is dead, what’s the hurry?
why this cumbersome worry?
there’s no referent and nothing is definite;
so do as you please; forget
poverty, education, disease.

please tell me why should I care; pack my bags
and go over there; pay plane, bus and taxi fare?
so what if children don’t eat and people can’t walk
down the street without rape, AIDS, pregnancy to meet?

i get the green thing. i have to live in this space with all
the rest of this evolving race. but there’s no Telos
so Darwin tells us—no meaning in our beginning;
no meaning in our end—so why should i care?

because apparently, we ain’t goin’ nowhere.

so dear world,

i decided i don’t care. but i can’t. i mean, just listen to this rant.
there’s care there.
care’s there from the start, presupposing Science and Art;
care recessed, repressed in my bleeding heart.

things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be,
and the Story of Biology is not sufficient—
they say we’re here on accident… but i need more.

i need more in order to account for this life
as we live it. look around and see people caring,
friend and neighbor sharing—poverty and injustice repairing.
there's care there… but, from where?

people don't love wholly right—even when striving
with all our light. we withhold, we withdraw, we fight.
we harbor anger; we brandish pride; we've all of us
murdered and lied; selfishly denied truth, justice, mercy.

and yet… there's Care there. it echoes in our tomes,
recalling to our breath and bones our Original Shimmering Start,
pulsating, all along, in our heart.

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"My Friend Believes Jesus' Miracles Were All Done by Mind Power"

I just had a conversation with a friend about his spiritual beliefs. I was talking about Jesus and my friend said that the miracles He performed were from His own mind power. That he had a higher control over his brain than other people. Jesus attributed his miracles to God's power but that's only because he didn't understand where the power came from.

He generally believes that there is a lot of power in oneself and if one will only utilize it and become self actualized one can become god-like.

I responded by talking about my belief in the fall and its effect on humanity. How man is hopelessly flawed and incomplete without Christ. I noted how man's efforts and science have failed to deliver. The world is still wrought with disease and suffering. I'm trying to be brief so I'll not go into the rest of the conversation. How would you have responded and do you have any suggestions on what to bring up the next time we talk about that kind of thing?

It sounds like you're doing a great job talking with your friend! Here are a few thoughts: It might be worth asking your friend, "If Jesus had such incredible control over His brain, including the ability to perform miracles by the sheer power of His mind, then how is it that He was deluded about where His power actually came from?" I would challenge your friend, "If Jesus was so superior to you in mental power and abilities, then why should you think that you know more about where His power came from than He did?" It's a question that deserves a careful answer, I should think.

More generally, however, I would ask your friend why anyone should believe his rather original spin about where Jesus' power came from? Why does he think he's correct? What evidence supports his opinion? Further, why does he reject what the New Testament says about Jesus? Shouldn't the original witnesses to these events have been in a better position to judge what happened than he is? What does he do with the evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospels, etc.?

Finally, if Jesus really died on the cross (which no serious scholar disputes) then how can your friend explain Jesus' greatest recorded miracle—His resurrection from the dead? If Jesus was dead, then how could He have used His brain to accomplish the miracle? If your friend doubts that Jesus rose from the dead, then challenge him to investigate the evidence for himself by reading some good books and articles on the subject. Challenge him to read Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Christ*. Or challenge him to read some of William Lane

Craig's work on the historicity of the resurrection. Log onto this site and register for free, then search for the following www.reasonablefaith.org:

- *Article: The Resurrection of Jesus*
- *Section: Scholarly Articles/The Historical Jesus (numerous relevant articles).*
- *Audio-Visuals Page and Debates Page: Dr. Craig also has audio and visual stuff as well as debate transcripts regarding the resurrection here*

I have tried to give you some helpful information here. But the most important thing is to share this information with genuine love, compassion and respect. No one likes an intellectual bully. So please be sensitive to the Spirit's guidance.

Hope this helps.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?

Former Probe intern Dr. Daniel Morais and Probe staffer Michael Gleghorn argue that Jesus' miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

What Do Modern Historians Think?

"I can believe Jesus was a great person, a great teacher. But I can't believe He performed miracles." Ever hear comments like this? Maybe you've wondered this yourself. Did Jesus really perform miracles?

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar{1}, has stated, "Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist."{2} Commenting on Jesus' ability to heal the blind, deaf, and others, A. M. Hunter writes, "For these miracles the historical evidence is excellent."{3}

Critical historians once believed that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible were purely the product of legendary embellishment. Such exaggerations about Jesus' life and deeds developed from oral traditions which became more and more fantastic with time until they were finally recorded in the New Testament. We all know how tall tales develop. One person tells a story. Then another tells much the same story, but exaggerates it a bit. Over time the story becomes so fantastic that it barely resembles the original. This is what many scholars once believed happened to Jesus' life, as it's recorded in the Gospels. Is this true? And do most New Testament historians believe this today?

The answer is no. In light of the evidence for the historicity of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels, few scholars today would attempt to explain these events as purely the result of legend or myth. In fact, most New Testament scholars now believe that Jesus did in fact perform healings and exorcisms.{4} Even many liberal scholars would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal and "exorcise demons."{5} But because many of these liberal scholars don't believe in spiritual beings, they also don't believe that these healings should be attributed to the direct intervention

of God in the world. Instead, they believe that Jesus' miracles and healings have a purely natural explanation. Many of them think that Jesus only healed psychosomatic maladies.{6} The term *psychosomatic* means mind-body, so psychosomatic maladies are mind-body problems. The mind can have a powerful impact on the health of the body. Under extreme distress people can become blind, deaf or even suffer paralysis. Since psychosomatic problems typically go away on their own, many liberal scholars think that faith in Jesus' ability to heal might help to heal some people suffering from these conditions. But is there good reason to believe that Jesus could cure real sicknesses?

Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

Often, historians who tried to explain away stories of Jesus' miracles as purely the result of legendary developments believed that the "real" Jesus was little more than a good man and a wise teacher. The major problem with this theory is that legends take time to develop. Multiple generations would be needed for the true oral tradition regarding Jesus' life to be replaced by an exaggerated, fictitious version. For example, many historians believe that Alexander the Great's biography stayed fairly accurate for about five hundred years. Legendary details didn't begin to develop until the following five hundred years.{7} A gross misrepresentation of Jesus' life occurring one or two generations after his death is highly unlikely. Jesus was a very public figure. When He entered a town, He drew large crowds of people. Jesus is represented as a miracle worker at every level of the New Testament tradition. This includes not only the four Gospels, but also the hypothetical sayings source, called Q, which may have been written just a few years after Jesus' death. Many eyewitnesses of Christ would still have been alive at the time these documents were composed. These eyewitnesses were the source of the oral tradition regarding Jesus' life, and in light of his

very public ministry, a strong oral tradition would be present in Israel for many years after his death.

If Jesus had never actually performed any miracles, then the Gospel writers would have faced a nearly impossible task in getting anyone to believe that He had. It would be like trying to change John F. Kennedy from a great president into an amazing miracle worker. Such a task would be virtually impossible since many of us have seen JFK on TV, read about him in the papers, or even seen him in person. Because he was a public figure, oral tradition about his life is very strong even today. Anyone trying to introduce this false idea would never be taken seriously.

During the second half of the first century, Christians faced intense persecution and even death. These people obviously took the disciples' teaching about Jesus' life seriously. They were willing to die for it. This only makes sense if the disciples and the authors of the Gospels represented Jesus' life accurately. You can't easily pass off made-up stories about public figures when eyewitnesses are still alive who remember them. Oral tradition tends to remain fairly accurate for many generations after their deaths.{8}

In light of this, it's hard to deny that Jesus did in fact work wonders.

Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder

It might be surprising to hear that Jesus is believed by most New Testament historians to have been a successful healer and exorcist.{9} Since His miracles are the most conspicuous aspect of his ministry, the miracle tradition found in the Gospels could not be easily explained had their authors started with a Jesus who was simply a wise teacher. Prophets and teachers of the law were not traditionally made into

miracle workers; there are almost no examples of this in the literature available to us.{10} It's especially unlikely that Jesus would be made into a miracle worker since many Jews didn't expect that the Messiah would perform miracles. The Gospel writers would not have felt the need to make this up were it not actually the case.{11}

Of course, most liberal scholars today don't believe Jesus could heal any real illnesses. But such conclusions are reached, not because of any evidence, but because of prior prejudices against the supernatural. Secular historians deny that Jesus cured any real, organic illnesses or performed any nature miracles such as walking on water.{12} They believe He could only heal *conversion disorders* or the symptoms associated with real illnesses.{13} Conversion disorder is a rare condition that afflicts approximately fourteen to twenty-two of every 100,000 people.{14} Conversion disorders are psychosomatic problems in which intense emotional trauma results in blindness, paralysis, deafness, and other baffling impairments.

Many liberal scholars today would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal. But if Jesus could only cure conversion disorders, then it's unlikely He would have drawn such large crowds. As a practicing optometrist, I've seen thousands of patients with real vision loss due either to refractive problems or pathology. But only one of them could be diagnosed with blindness due to conversion disorder. Conversion disorders are rare. In order for Jesus to draw large crowds of people He would have had to be a successful healer. But if He could only heal conversion disorders, thousands of sick people would have had to be present for him to heal just one person. But how could He draw such large crowds if He could only heal one person in 10,000? Sick people would have often needed to travel many miles to see Jesus. Such limited ability to heal could hardly have motivated thousands of people to walk many

miles to see Jesus, especially if they were sick and feeble. If Jesus was drawing large crowds, He must have been able to heal more than simply conversion disorders.

Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

"Did Jesus ever raise the dead? Is there any evidence to back this up?" Many secular historians, though agreeing that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist, don't believe that He could perform nature miracles. Due to prior prejudices against the supernatural, these historians don't believe it's possible for anyone to raise the dead, walk on water, or heal true organic diseases. These historians believe Jesus' healings were primarily psychological in nature.{15} Is there any evidence that Jesus had the power to work actual miracles such as raising the dead?

Yes. It almost seems that the more fantastic the miracle, the more evidence is available to support it. In fact, the most incredible miracle recorded in the Gospels is actually the one which has the greatest evidential support. This miracle is Jesus' resurrection.{16} Is there any reason to believe that Jesus may have raised others from the dead as well?

There is compelling evidence to believe that He did. In John 11 there's the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.{17} A careful reading of this text reveals many details that would be easy for anyone in the first century to confirm or deny. John records that Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. He also says that this miracle took place in Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, and that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. John's gospel is believed to have been written in AD 90, just sixty years after the events it records. It's possible that a few people who witnessed this event, or at least had heard of it, would still be alive to confirm it. If someone wanted to check this out, it would be easy to do. John says this took place in Bethany,

and then He tells us the town's approximate location. All someone would have to do to check this out would be to go to Bethany and ask someone if Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had ever been raised from the dead. Villages were generally small in those days and people knew each other's business. Almost anyone in that town could easily confirm or deny whether they had ever heard of such an event. If John just made this story up, he probably wouldn't have included so much information that could be easily checked out by others to see if he was lying. Instead, he probably would have written a vague story about Jesus going to some unnamed town where He raised some unnamed person from the dead. This way no one could confirm or deny the event. John put these details in to show that he wasn't lying. He wanted people to investigate his story. He wanted people to go to Bethany, ask around, and see for themselves what really happened there.

What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?

"Sure, Jesus' followers believed He could work miracles. But what about his enemies, what did they say?" If Jesus never worked any miracles, we would expect ancient, hostile Jewish literature to state this fact. But does such literature deny Jesus' ability to work miracles? There are several unsympathetic references to Jesus in ancient Jewish and pagan literature as early as the second century AD. But none of the ancient Jewish sources deny Jesus' ability to perform miracles.{18} Instead, they try to explain these powers away by referring to him as a sorcerer.{19} If the historical Jesus were merely a wise teacher who only later, through legendary embellishments, came to be regarded as a miracle worker, there should have been a prominent Jewish oral tradition affirming this fact. This tradition would likely have survived among the Jews for hundreds of years in order to counter the claims of Christians who might use Jesus' miraculous powers as evidence of his divine status. But there's no evidence that any such

Jewish tradition portrayed Jesus as merely a wise teacher. Many of these Jewish accounts are thought to have arisen from a separate oral tradition apart from that held by Christians, and yet both traditions agree on this point.{20} If it were known that Jesus had no special powers, these accounts would surely point that out rather than reluctantly affirm it. The Jews would likely have been uncomfortable with Jesus having miraculous powers since this could be used as evidence by his followers to support his self-proclaimed status as the unique Son of God (a position most Jews firmly denied). This is why Jesus' enemies tried to explain his powers away as sorcery.

Not only do these accounts affirm Jesus' supernatural abilities, they also seem to support the ability of his followers to heal in his name. In the Talmud, there's a story of a rabbi who is bitten by a venomous snake and calls on a Christian named Jacob to heal him. Unfortunately, before Jacob can get there, the rabbi dies.{21} Apparently, the rabbi believed this Christian could heal him. Not only did Jews seem to recognize the ability of Christians to heal in Christ's name, but pagans did as well. The name of Christ has been found in many ancient pagan spells.{22} If even many non-Christians recognized that there was power to heal in Christ's name, there must have been some reason for it.

So, a powerful case can be made for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Christians needn't view these miracles as merely symbolic stories intended to teach lessons. These miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

Notes

1. Gary R. Habermas, "Did Jesus Perform Miracles?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus,* by eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 124.
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and*

The Life of Discipleship (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 61.
3. A.M. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 63.
4. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 124.
5. See Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision,* 60.
6. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
7. Craig L. Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
8. Grant R Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 102, 103.
9. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 124, 125.
10. Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley: Seastone, 1998), 21.
11. Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 247.
12. Ibid.
13. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
14. See the National Organization for Rare Diseases' official Web site at www.rarediseases.org/nord/search/rdbdetail_fullreport_pf (5/04/2006).
15. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
16. William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History,* by eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 247-261 and Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," Ibid., 261-275.
17. John. 11:1-44.
18. See Alan Humm, "Toledoth Yeshu," at ccat.sas.upenn.edu/humm/Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.html (2/17/1997).
19. Ibid.
20. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker*, 255.
21. Smith, *Jesus the Magician,* 63.

22. Ibid., 83.

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"Help Me Know That God is Really There"

I read your article Evidence for God's Existence. I have always believed in God until recently when I read some articles by James Randi known to most people as "The Amazing Randi." He seems to be able to disprove the divine power of people who claim to be able to talk to the dead and move objects with their minds with scientific proof that they are merely just cheap parlor tricks. I believe he is correct not only because he says so but because the bible tells us that Jesus was the last person on earth who could do such things as tell the future or perform miracles etc. But what if Jesus knew these parlor tricks which are as old as the hills? I saw Siegfried and Roy make an elephant disappear right before my very eyes in front of a thousand people and admit to trickery. Who is to say that Jesus didn't know how to fool the average person in the same way thousands of years ago? Please understand that I am not being a wise guy. I truly have issues with this because I was such a firm believer in God and Jesus Christ. If God doesn't exist, then I am truly alone and have wasted many hours and prayers on things that would or wouldn't happen anyway with or without my prayers.

Also, I have been talking to myself all these years and I must be crazy. I realize the consequences of my decision not to believe in God if I am wrong. Somehow that seems trivial while I am still alive. I still go to church every Sunday with my wife. I don't let on that my faith has been diminished because

my wife is such a good God-fearing woman and I don’t want to impose my beliefs on her or anyone else. Especially if I am wrong. What it boils down to is if science can prove that the existence of God is only something that exists in my mind, and the voice I hear inside myself is my own self, then I am guilty of being a fool. For he who teaches himself has a fool for a master. True the earth is a miracle in itself and surely no parlor trick. I can’t explain how it all began if there is no God. But we as just mankind can’t even begin to explain any theory with our limited knowledge of the universe. If Siegfried and Roy can make an elephant disappear in front of all those people and admit it is a trick, yet nobody can figure out how it was done, than it is understandable that the beginning of the world which must be a far greater “trick” and is something that we as ordinary individuals can never figure out. Bad things happen in this world that I feel shouldn’t. I love my family and my pets. I don’t want to see them die. But they must die just as I must die. What if there isn’t anything after death and you just lie there in the ground. That beautiful gift of life has been destroyed. I can’t accept that a loving God would take these things away from me or anyone who hold them so near and dear to their heart. Could it be that God is for the weak minded who need direction and discipline to get through life without going off course for their own good? Is life just a crap shoot anyway where what ever happens, happens whether you pray or not? Please forgive me if I have offended you with my talk of disbelief but I thought if anyone could answer my questions, you could. I don’t mean any disrespect. I need to know that God is really there to hear my prayers and help me to make decisions. I need to know that I am not on my own in this world and my prayers are heard and answered according to his word not just my imagination or wishful thinking.

Dear _____,

Bless your heart! Thank you you SO MUCH for sharing your deep

thoughts and fears with me. I have two things to say in response.

1. The best thing Jesus ever did to prove that what He did was true miracles and not tricks was to rise from the dead. How do you counterfeit THAT? The resurrection is the strongest evidence for the truth of Christianity that we have. Consider that the disciples, who had been so disheartened by His death (even though He had promised several times to rise from the dead), were so turned around by seeing Him alive again that they changed the world and were willing to die for their belief in a risen Savior. If it were only a trick, no one would have died for a lie. May I suggest you get a hold of Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ* and shore up your faith? I think that book will really help. (Consider also other people—like Strobel the former skeptic—who set out to prove the resurrection false, like Frank Morison, and were so overwhelmed by the evidence that they became believers and wrote books like *Who Moved the Stone?*)

2. I believe that the doubts that assail you are nothing more than spiritual warfare. I think you are being attacked by the spiritual forces of darkness, and I gently suggest you read Ephesians 6 and put on the armor of faith to fight these horrible attacks. I have also been impressed by Kay Arthur's book *Lord, Is It Warfare?* to help deal with spiritual warfare in the form of attacking doubts.

_____, I am completely convinced that this period of doubts in your life is like being outside on a bright sunny day when the sun disappears because it is obscured by a cloud. . . temporarily. You are not alone—you would not BELIEVE how many e-mails I get just like yours. You have put your faith in an eternal truth, not in lie. I promise.

Cheerily in Jesus,

Sue Bohlin

“Were Jesus’ Miracles a Demonstration of His Humanity or Deity?”

I am writing a thesis about Jesus’ dual nature and I would like to know what you think about the miracles Jesus performed. Were they a demonstration of His humanity or deity? I’ve already heard that He performed His miracles as a man who was been used by the Holy Spirit as some preachers today that have the gift of healing. Please give me biblical references.

Great question!

His deity. Only God can do miracles; there’s nothing in our humanness that can do them.

When Jesus exorcised demons, He simply said, “Be gone,” not “In the name of the Father.” When He calmed the sea, He simply said, “Be still,” not “In the name of Yahweh.” When he fed the 4,000 and the 5,000, He simply blessed the food and kept handing it out. Period.

We do see examples of people performing miracles in the Bible, like Peter healing the crippled in man in Acts 3:6. Peter had no power on his own, but said, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Jesus never had to appeal to a higher power; He WAS the higher power.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin

Miracles

Miracles: What Are They?

Have you noticed how often the word *miracle* is used these days? Skin creams that make us look younger; computer technology; the transition of a nation from oppression to freedom; what a quarterback needs to pull off for his team to have a winning season. All these are called *miracles* today. Anything that takes extreme effort or which amazes people is now a miracle. I'm still amazed that airplanes stay in the air. But is that a *miracle*?

To begin our discussion we'll first put forth a definition. To clarify the nature of a miracle will also require making distinctions in God's activities in creation. Then we'll respond to objections to the possibility of miracles. Finally, we'll consider their apologetic use.

So, what is a miracle? In his book, *All the Miracles of the Bible,* Herbert Lockyer said that a miracle is "some extraordinary work of deity transcending the ordinary powers of nature and wrought in connection with the ends of revelation."{1} Notice the three elements: miracles are supernatural, or the work of deity; they transcend or override natural law; and they are part of God's means of revealing His nature and purposes to us.

In Acts. 2:22, Peter speaks of the "miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through" Jesus. This reference to *miracles* can also be translated *power*. Miracles demonstrate

the supernatural power of God over nature and evil forces. This power was seen in Jesus' healing the sick; calming the storm; and raising people from the dead. Such events occurred in opposition to the normal course of nature; they could only be done by a supernatural power.

The word *wonders* refers to the response the miracles evoked in the observers, a response of astonishment and fear. Observers knew they had seen something out of the ordinary, something that in its greatness could even be threatening to them.

Still a third word used by Peter in Acts 2:22 points to the revelatory purpose of miracles. There, Peter referred to the *signs* of Jesus. This word stresses that aspect of miracles which draws attention to the significance of the event. Signs point to or reveal something else.

First, they indicated a relationship between the miracle worker and God. In John 5:36 Jesus said that his works were evidence that he had been sent by God. Second, they pointed to a fuller activity of God still to come. As one writer said: "The power Jesus exhibited was a foretaste of the power to be revealed at the end of the age."{2}

Also, miracles are revelatory themselves in that they reveal the nature of God. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. He *said* he was the Savior, and he *showed* he was the Savior by doing saving things. He healed diseases; he delivered the demon-possessed; he saved from the fury of the storm.

So, miracles are from God; they override nature; and they reveal God. They aren't simply amazing events. When just about *anything* amazing is called a miracle simply *because* it's amazing, real miracles lose their significance.

Miracles and Providence

The word *miracle* is used so often and to describe so many things that it's lost its power. One of the reasons events are

called miracles which shouldn't be—at least by Christians—is that we want to give due honor to God for His work in our lives. This is how it should be. However, in order to give miracles their due, we should distinguish the different kinds of activity of God in this world.

We can think of God's involvement in three categories. First, what we call *providence,* which is God's ongoing work in sustaining the universe He created and the people in it. He keeps the stars in place; He provides for our physical needs; and He is active in the governing of societies. People have come to learn that things work a certain way, whether they are believers in God or not. No explicit belief in God is necessary to explain such things. Events on this level are not miracles.

Second, God is active in what we might call *special providence*. "Special providences," said theologian Louis Berkhof, "are special combinations in the order of events, as in the answer to prayer, in deliverance out of trouble, and in all instances in which grace and help come in critical circumstances."{3} God's hand is "visible" in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way.

Our move to Texas to work with Probe is an example. When we survey all the events that led up to our move, we recognize that God had to have been involved. But that's because we set these events in the context of the thinking, the decisions, and the prayers of people who sought God's will. However, people who aren't inclined to see God working in our lives would see nothing supernatural about such events. They might simply see that we made a decision to move, the leadership of Probe and our church concurred, and a bunch of other people who support us agreed. Is this type of occurrence a miracle? In my opinion it isn't. Although God was involved in a special way, the laws of nature weren't transcended.

The third category of God's involvement is *miracles* that we defined earlier as events, which are supernatural in origin, transcend or violate natural laws, and serve a revelatory function in God's redemptive work. Here the hand of God is clearly visible to anyone who doesn't deliberately refuse to believe. The event is contrary to the normal course of nature; no scientific explanation is possible. Of a purported miracle, we might ask this question: Is it impossible that the event could have taken place without God's special intervention to alter the inevitable course of nature?

These three categories are not rigidly divided. They form more of a continuum. The distinguishing mark is the visibility of God's hand in a given event. Is He in the background, simply maintaining His created order? Or has He manipulated certain events to a certain end without making His presence clearly seen by all? Or has He acted so powerfully in the realm of nature that there is no other reasonable explanation?

The purpose of such considerations is that we might not use the word *miracle* too lightly. To accomplish their role, miracles must remain distinct from that which is simply amazing.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and Natural Law

Miracles have come under attack for centuries now. In short, objectors seem to assume that *our* lives' experience is normative. With respect to *environment*, it is assumed that what we see in nature is all there is or can be. With respect to *time,* also, critics say that our experience *today* determines what could have happened *yesterday*, or that our limitations do not allow us to know what happened in the past. Let's consider first the question of nature, and then at the problem of historical knowledge with respect to miracles.

Miracles came under heavy attack during the Enlightenment by

deists and atheists, and later by liberal churchmen. In the heady days of the rise of science, many came to see miracles as violations of natural law. To the rationalists of that day, such a violation was an impossibility. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, put it this way: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."{4}

This raises two questions. First, are natural laws inviolable? Second, how do we interpret the evidence?

First, the question of natural law. Some critics believe simply that there is no power higher than nature and thus no power that could supersede the laws of nature. This is naturalism, a philosophical belief that can't itself be proved by what is seen in nature. This is a philosophical assumption, and we shouldn't be put off by it. We believe that God exists, and being the creator of the natural laws, He is above them Himself and able to alter them. They don't. To undermine the possibility of miracles, naturalists must prove there is no God to perform them. On the other hand, if we can show that non-natural events *did* or *have* occurred, the naturalist will have to find some explanation in his worldview for them.

Other critics may not argue from an atheistic standpoint, but they hold that a universe in which natural laws can be broken is inherently unstable. If miracles occurred, all would be chaos. We answer that if God is powerful enough to create nature and to override its laws, He is also powerful enough to keep the rest of nature in order.

Thus, the reality of natural law is no deterrent to miracles.

Second, how do we weigh the evidence for and against miracles? What about Hume's objection that there is more evidence *against* miracles than *for* them? First, the abundant evidence

of order at most suggests that miracles are the rare exception. But this is what makes them so significant! Consider, too, that the proper use of evidences includes being open to new evidences, including those of unusual occurrences. Second, evidences should be *weighed*, not just *counted*. So, to illustrate, we are more likely to accept the testimony of one person known for honesty and integrity over the evidence of five known liars. The quality of the evidence is what counts.

As I noted earlier, arguments against miracles based upon the workings of nature typically reveal an underlying philosophy of naturalism. But there is another kind of objection to miracles. That is, that history can't bear the weight of proving miracles occurred in the past. We'll turn our attention to that objection next.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and History

We have looked briefly at David Hume's argument against miracles based on natural law. On the surface, Hume's argument was against *proving* a miracle, not against the *reality* of miracles *per se*. His main point was that we can't *know* whether a miracle occurred because our knowledge is gleaned from evidences, and the preponderance of evidence is always *for* natural law and *against* miracles. He believed that it would be more likely, that, for example, all the witnesses *lied* than that a person was raised from the dead. How was Hume so sure of this? "Because," he said, 'that has never been observed in any age or country."{5} So, when someone *said* they *saw* a miracle, Hume said they were deluded or were lying because no one's ever seen a miracle! It seems clear that Hume's argument against *knowing* whether a miracle occurred was based upon his prior *conviction* that miracles don't occur.

Of course, if no evidence could be sufficient to prove miracles in the present, records of miracles in history were

surely faulty. If we don't experience miracles today, Hume thought, there's no reason to think others did in the past.

Anthony Flew, a contemporary philosopher, has built on Hume's argument. He says there must be uniformity between the present (the time of the historian) and the past (when the event took place) to make any reasonable interpretation of the past. This is called the *rule of analogy*. The regularities of nature are part of our present experience, and we must assume they were the experience of people in the past.

This argument presupposes that there are no miracles occurring now. How do critics know this? Either they must be omniscient, or they must begin with a naturalistic worldview which by definition precludes miracles. One also wonders how Flew could accept *any* unique, singular event in history, such as the origins of the universe and of life, if regularity is a requirement for historical knowledge.

Other critics say the problem is with the study of history *per se*. They argue that historical knowledge is too subjective for us to know what really happened in the past. Our own values, worldviews and prejudices color our understanding so that there aren't any historically objective facts. But if this is so, the critic's own judgment about historical knowledge is too colored by his own values, etc., to be taken as objective fact. As philosopher Frances Beckwith notes, this also means that no interpretation of history can be considered bad, and that there is no reason to revise history (except perhaps for the historian's amusement).{6}

It would seem that those who deny miracles are typically predisposed against them. If this is the case, is there any apologetic use for miracles? Let's look at this next.

The Apologetic Use of Miracles

"Miracle was once the foundation of all apologetics, then it

became an apologetic crutch, and today it is not infrequently regarded as a cross for apologetics to bear." So said a German theologian in the early part of this century.{7} While it's true that evidential apologetics emphasizes the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, miracles in general play little role in apologetics today.

What's the proper role of miracles in apologetics? First, of course, Christians need to answer the charge that miracles can't happen, and that the Bible, therefore, isn't true. Miracles are an integral part of Christianity; to side-step objections to them by downplaying their role is to abandon the cause.

But what about persuasion? In Scripture, were miracles used as evidence to persuade unbelievers?

We see in the New Testament that miracles *did* serve as evidence and they brought some people to belief. When Jesus raised Lazarus "many of the Jews . . . put their faith in Him" (Jn.11:45; see also Acts 2:22-41; 5:12-16; 6:7,8; 8:6-8; Rom. 15:18,19). But note that some went to the Pharisees and ratted on Jesus.At other times Jesus chastised the Pharisees because they believed neither His words nor His works (Jn.10:22-32; 15:24). Not everyone believed in response to miracles (cf. Acts 14:3,4).

Remember that Jesus didn't do miracles for people who had no faith-such as the people in His hometown (Matt. 13:58)—or for those who insisted that He prove Himself to them-such as the Jewish leaders (Matt. 16:1-4). When He ministered in His hometown, for instance, people took offense at Him, and Matthew says, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith". Matthew also reports that Jesus refused the Jewish leaders when they came to Him "and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven" (16:1-4)

No, Jesus' miracles were done in response to faith. But this

wasn't necessarily explicit faith in Jesus as Savior. It could have been simply the openness to God of people who were willing to hear. By doing miracles, Jesus identified himself as the Messiah who had been prophesied.{8} People either recognized the fulfillment of prophecy or simply recognized the hand of God, or both.

Someone might ask, even if people won't accept miracles, might they not respond to the simple preaching of the cross? Remember that miracles were part of God's revelation of His redemptive activity. They were set in the context of the spoken message of Jesus. People who refused the spoken word also refused to accept the evidence of miracles. As Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus' parable, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Lk.16:31)

Thus, in answer to the question whether miracles can bring people to belief in Christ, they can if the deep-down knowledge of God that Paul said we all have (Rom.1:20) is first awakened. But for those who have deliberately shut God out of their lives and their worldview, miracles won't do any more to convince them than hearing Scripture will.

Miracles, then, provide evidence for the identity of Jesus and for the truth of the message He proclaimed especially when paired with prophecy. They should thus be a part of the package of evidences we employ. We will not convince everyone of the truth of Jesus Christ. But if God chose miracles as confirming evidence, we should not shun them.

Notes

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 13-14.

2. Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v.

“Might,” by O. Betz

3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 168.

4. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Activity in History* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 33

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 89-90

7. Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 281.

8. Ibid., 286-87.

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