

In Defense of Biblical Miracles

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Miracles represent a significant stumbling block to those who ponder the accuracy of the Bible and the truth of the Christian message. In this article, the author attempts to place biblical miracles in their proper context by addressing the following key questions: “What role do miracles play in the Bible?”; “Are miracles impossible?”; and “Can the existence of miracles be defended?” This essay will provide a *Christian defense* of biblical miracles against common objections.^{[1](#)}

Purpose of Miracles

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While the authenticity of miracles has been intensely debated, it may surprise some to learn that the mention of miracles in the Bible is a rarity. Though these supernatural events were memorably recorded in the Old and New Testament,

miracles were referenced only infrequently. Indeed, as philosopher Richard Howe has noted: “In the vast millennia of biblical history, miracles are not that common and occur in clusters... there is a purpose of miracles surrounding God’s working His revelation and will with mankind” (2014, 633).

Most of the 126+ miraculous events in the Bible are *clustered around certain people* like Moses, Joshua, the prophets, and Jesus. The miracles performed by these key figures marked important events in the history of Israel, but they were not, by any means, frequent occurrences. Thus, when the Bible is carefully examined, it becomes evident that miracles were (1) relatively infrequent, (2) centered around specifically chosen people, and (3) used to authenticate the divine commission of the messengers of God.² Howe explained the purpose of miracles as follows: “I contend that strictly speaking, miracles are given by God to *vindicate His messenger and confirm the message*” (Ibid., 634, italics added). Thus, in the midst of the pantheon of so-called gods in the ancient Near East, *Yahweh*—the sovereign Creator-God of the Hebrews—periodically elected to confirm his supremacy and will through the outworking of miracles.

Definition of “Miracle”

“*a miracle can be defined as a periodic and temporary interference with the laws of nature so that God’s presence, power, and/or purpose might be understood.*”

In Christian doctrine, the existence of miracles obviously hinges on the existence of God.³ If God exists and created the universe, including the laws of nature, then it is not a stretch to believe that he can intervene in the operation of those laws when he so chooses. Ultimately, the only way to prove the impossibility of miracles is to prove the impossibility of the existence of God.

The late literary scholar and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis defined miracles as

“an interference with Nature by supernatural power” (1947, 5).⁴ This definition affirms that miracles represent a temporary *interference* with the laws of nature by the biblical God. Since God created everything, including natural laws, he can intervene as he chooses and according to his purposes. If God exists and created the universe, then it is not a stretch to think he can intercede in the natural world to fulfill his divine plans. Thus, for this article, a *biblical miracle* will be defined as *any event in which God temporarily intervenes in the natural world so that his presence, power, and purpose might be understood and believed*.

Are Miracles Impossible?

There are some people for whom miracles will never be an acceptable belief because they are not willing to admit even the possibility of the supernatural. No matter what experiences are encountered and no matter how the claims of others are perceived, true skeptics never seem to regard these experiences or claims as pointing to actual miracles. Such people may lack the discipline or, perhaps, the desire to rigorously examine purported miraculous events on a case-by-case basis.

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Nevertheless, there are certain professional disciplines in which such skepticism is allowed and even required. Science, history, medicine, and other fields are not at liberty to accept miraculous explanations since the methodological assumptions of their disciplines don’t allow it. In most scientific disciplines, all proposed hypotheses must be empirically falsifiable or are in some way limited to the study of empirically explainable causes. In other words, all proposed causes and explanations must be naturalistic ones. Thus, even when scientific methods conclude that a naturalistic hypothesis is “improbable,” “has no reasonable explanation,” or is “medically inexplicable,” scientists cannot legitimately

conclude that the alternate hypothesis—a “miracle”—is true. Scientific methodology entertains only naturalistic, not supernatural, causes.

Spinoza and Hume Against Miracles

On the other hand, philosophers and theologians have a wide open field of discourse when it comes to metaphysical topics. Many of these have critiqued miracles on the basis of philosophical argumentation. For example, Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), a Jewish-Dutch philosopher, attacked miracles head-on and, in the process, put forth his own brand of pantheism.⁵ He did not believe in a monotheistic God but instead equated God with nature. Spinoza understood miracles as a violation of natural law. He considered any claim that God could intervene in the natural course of events to be absurd: “I have taken miracles and ignorance as equivalent terms” (Spinoza 1996).

Spinoza’s argument against miracles can be summarized as follows: (1) The laws of nature flow from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature (i.e., the divine nature = the laws of nature). (2) Nothing can violate the laws of nature since nature is immutable (i.e., fixed, set, unchanging). (3) A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. (4) Therefore, purported biblical ‘miracles’ violate the laws of nature and are, therefore, impossible.

The problem here is that Spinoza patently *begs the question!*⁶ The key premise is number 2: “Nothing can violate the laws of nature since nature is immutable.” If Spinoza knew in advance that natural laws are immutable, then, of course, miracles would be impossible. But, there was no way for Spinoza to prove this premise unless he already knew that violations of natural laws (i.e., miracles) are impossible. Instead, Spinoza merely assumed that natural laws are immutable. Nevertheless, assumptions cannot justify themselves.

David Hume (1711-1776) was perhaps best known for his philosophical skepticism, and he was especially skeptical of miracles. Following the naturalistic determinism of Spinoza, Hume reasoned as follows (1993, 76):

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, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.

While Spinoza tried to show that miracles were actually *impossible*, Hume most likely thought them to be merely *incredible* (i.e., difficult or nearly impossible to believe). This particular argument was an argument from experience. According to Hume, purported miracles represent a contradiction to our *uniform experience* against them. Thus, any claim of a miracle must be mistaken. For Hume, a uniform experience against miracles acts as a kind of proof that they do not occur.

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It is not always clear exactly how Hume meant his argument against miracles to be understood. Either he was arguing that he already knew that *all* human experiences were uniform against miracles, or he knew that the experiences of *some* people were uniform against miracles. If it's the former, then he begged the question. If Hume claimed to *know* that all human experiences are uniform against miracles, he assumed what he was trying to prove. For unless one knows all things, one cannot know with certainty that all human experiences are uniform against miracles. And, if one cannot know that all human experience is uniform against miracles, then one cannot know that the laws of nature cannot be violated based solely on a claim of uniform experience. Moreover, the claim that all humans have “unalterable experience” against miracles is the very point at issue. Accordingly, one cannot use as proof the very assertion that is being questioned.

If, on the other hand, Hume is referring to the experiences of *some* humans (i.e., those who have not experienced miracles), then he errs by *special pleading*.⁷ In other words, since there are many who have claimed to have experienced miracles, the claimed experience of a skeptic is not sufficient to cancel out the claimed experience of a believer. Indeed, “hundreds of millions of people in today's world claim to have witnessed supernatural healings” (Keener 2012,

Kindle location 5068). Thus, each and every miracle claim, whether found in the Bible or in today's modern world, cannot be dismissed outright but must be considered separately and the evidence assessed appropriately.

Was Gullibility or Ignorance by Ancient People a Critical Factor in Accepting Miracles?

There are some who would have us believe that people in biblical times were more apt to trust in the existence of miracles simply because they were ignorant of the laws of nature. That is, had they understood natural laws, they would have correctly attributed all the supposed supernatural events to natural causes. I can understand why some would think this, and I can even agree that it may be true in some instances. Just as non-believers will often not believe in miracles because of their predisposition against the supernatural, believers may read miracles into natural events because of wishful thinking or perhaps simply because of their subjective belief in miracles. Nevertheless, while one's belief in miracles is not proof that they exist, neither does such belief serve as evidence against miracles. The fact that someone believes in something doesn't mean it's not true: Just because I believe the sun will rise tomorrow doesn't mean it won't. The key point is that *neither belief nor unbelief necessarily establishes the truth (or falsity) of miracle claims*. Each miracle claim must be considered separately and assessed critically and comprehensively to shed light on its potential authenticity.

It seems abundantly clear to me that people in ancient times did understand the natural order and could see the difference between regularly occurring patterns of nature and exceptions to such patterns. It is only because of the regularity of nature that miracles were interpreted by biblical characters as interventions by God into the natural laws that He created. Any claim of a "miracle" would have no relevance outside of the consistency, regularity, pattern, and structure of the laws that operate in the world. The point here is *that a miracle claim, in some sense, presupposes the knowledge of a natural order*.

In New Testament times, the understanding of natural law was displayed quite vividly by Joseph's reaction to the unexpected pregnancy of Mary (Matt. 1:18-19 [NASB]):

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was

pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Joseph rightly understood that, according to the regularities observed in nature, conception and pregnancy required intercourse. The fact that he had not come together with Mary could, in his mind, mean only one thing: infidelity. Thus, Joseph desired to divorce Mary quietly. His mistaken notion was not that he didn't understand natural law but that he didn't realize that God had intervened. This fact had to be pointed out to him by an angel of the Lord who appeared in a dream, saying; "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20, NASB). The point here is: that *a miracle claim presupposes some knowledge of a natural order.*

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Miracle claims are strengthened when the events are witnessed by many people simultaneously. Because a good number of the *miracles recorded in the Bible*⁸ were witnessed by many people at the same time; it is doubtful that all were mistaken in believing a genuine miracle took place when it didn't. For example, what led people to believe that Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-46)—who had died, been body-wrapped, and entombed for four days—was resurrected to life by Jesus? Was it gullibility or wishful thinking that influenced all those people to believe? Or could it have simply been that four days earlier, Lazarus was dead and buried, but when Jesus called him forth from the tomb, he rose from the dead? In another example, could Jesus' instantaneous healing of a man who was born blind (Jn. 9:1-7) have been misunderstood by the people who witnessed the

event? Was nobody familiar with this man's background? Did he not have friends and family who could verify that he had been blind his entire life? It blurs the lines of believability to think that ancient people, no matter how little their knowledge of the natural world, could have mistaken such clear examples as these.

So, while it is one thing to claim that some people in ancient times read miracles into natural events, it's quite another to claim that every miracle witnessed in the Bible and elsewhere can be attributed to mistaken notions about natural laws or wishful thinking.

Modern Miracles

The topic of modern-day miracles diverges a bit from biblical miracles. In one case, we have those miracles that are recorded in the Bible, which are separated from us in history, culture, and language. On the other hand, we have purported miracles that have been wrought in various places worldwide in modern times.

In today's world, purported miracles are often witnessed by people who can record and quickly disseminate accounts of the event. The vast majority of people living today have enough knowledge of the natural world to assess the truth of claims of spontaneous healing. Especially when there are reliable witnesses of such events. Indeed, there are numerous examples of such healings, as well as many reliable witnesses.

Medical doctors tend to be excellent witnesses when it comes to medical miracles. That is because they can often confirm a patient's medical history and have sometimes personally examined the patient. They may also be more critical in terms of evaluating miracle claims because of their academic training and experience.

Craig S. Keener (2012, Kindle location 8880) related the testimony of Dr. Martin Biery, a specialist in spinal cord surgery at a hospital in California. Biery testified that, in an open prayer service, he witnessed patients "whose spines were frozen get instantaneous freedom and move and bend in all directions without pain." Another physician, Dr. Viola Frymann (Ibid., Kindle location 8885), testified to cures she witnessed, including a "child, whose arm and leg were paralyzed from cerebral palsy... healed before her eyes." Dr. James Blackann witnessed a case

where a boy was born with a deformed foot, which normally could only be corrected by major surgery followed by a lengthy period of convalescence. According to Blackann, when the boy was prayed for by Kathryn Kuhlmann, who called out that God was healing a child's legs, the boy "walked up to the stage, ran back and forth, and skipped" (Ibid., Kindle location 8891). Dr. Blackann also stated: "I've seen massive cysts disperse immediately and I've seen spastic conditions disappear. I've seen arthritic spines and limbs instantly freed in [Kuhlmann's] services" (Ibid.)

Keener (Ibid., Kindle locations 5925–5931) also related examples of people who were healed of deafness and muteness:

Among the many persons healed of deafness and muteness was a young woman deaf and mute for twelve years, and on another occasion 'an old man who had been deaf in both ears since he was a young man was instantly healed.' Instant healing through prayer also came to a twenty-eight-year-old who had been deaf and mute all his life and was instantly healed.

These, as well as thousands of other spontaneous healings, have been carefully documented by a number of writers. For more examples of documented miracle claims, refer to the book entitled *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2011). Written by Craig S. Keener, this two-volume work not only establishes the credibility of miracles but also thoroughly documents hundreds, if not thousands, of modern-day miracles from around the globe. For a popular treatment of miracles written in a highly readable style, I recommend the book, *The Case for Miracles* by Lee Strobel (2018).

Suspension of Disbelief

What would happen if a skeptic were to temporarily suspend her disbelief in miracles? Or, even better, if she suspended her disbelief in God? Once the existence of God has been accepted, even for the sake of argument, then there is no security against miracles. As C. S. Lewis (1947, 109) pointed out: "That is the bargain. Theology says to you in effect, 'Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles, and I in return will ratify your faith in uniformity as regards the overwhelming majority of events.'" What Lewis was saying is that God's existence makes sense out of the numerous *seemingly inexplicable phenomena in*

*the universe;*⁹ including miracles.

If one's assumptions eliminate the supernatural by definition, then, of course, one would never agree that a miracle has happened in the world. However, if one accepts, even provisionally, a deity who acts purposefully in history, then it would seem unreasonable not to, at very least, accept reliable eyewitness testimony to count in favor of miracles. In other words, a rational and fair-minded person should take the accounts of miracles seriously, especially when those claims are put forth by reliable eyewitnesses.

Conclusion

“*the doubter of miracles ultimately has to look somewhere other than ancient man's gullibility and/or lack of understanding of natural laws for an answer to the accounts of miracles in the Bible.*”

In my opinion, tales of miracles would have had little or no impact on any ancient people unless the accounts had some credibility. While some incidents may have been embellished or wrongly credited, it doesn't seem plausible that every purported miracle could have been attributable to natural laws or a lack of sophistication of the witnesses. Therefore, the doubter of miracles ultimately has to look somewhere other than ancient man's gullibility and/or lack of understanding for an answer to the accounts of miracles in the Bible.

Though early man's knowledge of the laws of nature was, no doubt, incomplete, he nevertheless knew enough to understand that there were regular, recurring patterns in nature and that an interruption of these patterns was not normal. While it may be true that, on occasion, people in biblical times mistakenly understood a natural event to be a miracle, it is highly unlikely that they could have been fooled in every instance.

As a counterpoint, one should keep in mind that *it may be the skeptic who is*

mistaken. That is, perhaps it is the doubter of miracles who, on occasion, mistakingly concludes that a miraculous event is a natural one simply because of wishful thinking or a sincere desire for it to be so.

If miracles are *possible*—and it seems undeniable that they are—then simply rejecting them without examining the evidence is tantamount to rational suicide. Indeed, according to Keener (2012, Kindle location 3685):

As events, phenomena that people interpret as miracles can be examined scientifically and historically.... Regardless of causation, a person either did recover from a disease or did not, although we quite often lack access to information that makes the initial diagnosis certain.

Keener further

notes: “To exclude the possibility of some sort of suprahuman and possibly supernatural intelligent causation is to a priori rule out what may be a very plausible explanation of some evidence—yet many Western intellectuals do just this” (2012, Kindle location 3705).

Ultimately, miracles must be judged on their own merits. On one hand, if reports of miracles are found in the biblical text, then they can be assessed using the tools of forensic science, including clues from circumstantial evidence and historical analysis, to determine the plausibility of such claims. On the other hand, purported modern-day miracles can be examined by incorporating many of the same principles and practices used in empirical science (i.e., observation, testing, interviews, descriptive statistics, etc.). One does not have to assume the existence of God to defend a hypothesis of miracles; one simply need not rule out the hypothesis beforehand by assuming that God, and/or the supernatural realm, doesn’t exist.

In summary, the Bible purports a natural order that was created by God (Gen. 1:14–18) and is controlled by Him. Interventions by God into the natural order are called miracles, and said miracles are described in various places in the Bible. From a Christian viewpoint, it is only by disproving the existence of God that one can, ultimately, disprove miracles. Nevertheless, if such a God exists, He most certainly can suspend the laws He created in order to produce miraculous events.

About the Author

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Footnotes