

Deadly Questions - Miracles

Mark Pickering and Peter Saunders return to a classic apologetics topic.[1]

Have you ever been embarrassed by the miracles in the Bible? Have you winced at the thought of defending them before your medical colleagues? How about the account of creation,[2] the ten plagues of the Exodus,[3] the day the sun stood still,[4] or perhaps some of the healing miracles of Jesus?

The theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) tried to 'demythologise' the teaching of Jesus by stripping away the miraculous. He went so far as to say:

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.[5]

This belief is really what is in the minds of most modern western people when they discount the possibility of miracles. As far as they are concerned, the Bible was written in a prescientific age when many natural phenomena (eg thunder, lightning, earthquakes) were attributed to direct divine action. We now know that there are perfectly natural explanations for these and many other phenomena. People in Bible times may have been more willing to believe miracle stories, but that is indefensible today. So the story goes...

For Christian medical students and doctors the issue is a live one. How do we treat the miraculous healings and events of the Bible? Do we believe in miraculous healing today? These are very pertinent questions to which we need a clear answer, not least because to deny the miraculous is to deny God himself. If miracles did not happen, then the resurrection did not happen and our faith is therefore in vain.[6]

Before going any further, we should define our terms. A miracle is any event that cannot be explained by natural processes or phenomena and which requires a supernatural agent to perform it.

Historical background[7]

For many centuries, most Europeans believed in the intervention of supernatural forces, whether God or lesser beings, such as angels and demons. However, with the rise of the Enlightenment in Europe during the 17th century, this thinking changed dramatically.

Isaac Newton (1643-1727) formed his laws of motion and promoted the idea that what goes on in the world is simply a matter of cause and effect, with everything following very strict rules. This was part of the background for the rise of deism, a philosophical worldview that involved belief in a personal God who created the universe, but later withdrew, leaving it to run automatically like a great clockwork contraption, without him ever interfering again. This meant that miracles were impossible because God was thought never to intervene.

Spinoza

One of the main proponents of deism was Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632-1677) and he was a passionate opponent of the miraculous. He based this on two main lines of attack:

i) The unchangeable order of nature

Spinoza held that God's understanding and his will were one and the same, that both were unchanging and eternal and that the laws of nature flowed out from these. Thus for a miracle to occur that defied the laws of nature, this would indicate some essential change in the nature of God, which was impossible.

ii) The need for certainty

He also maintained that a proof of God's existence must be absolutely certain. For him, the constancy of the natural world and its processes was proof of God's existence, and therefore if miracles disturbed this order they cast doubt on God's existence and led us towards atheism!

Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) took a different approach but was just as vehement in his opposition to miracles. He again had two main arguments:

i) Miracles are impossible to prove in principle

Belief should be proportionate to evidence. For Hume, the evidence of the unchangeability of the natural order was absolute, so that even if, for the sake of argument, absolute proof could be given for the occurrence of a certain miracle, this would at best equal the opposing evidence and mean that a miracle could not be asserted with any certainty.

ii) The evidence for miracles is actually weak

Despite his concessions above, Hume maintained that the evidence for miracles was not even enough to make them probable, let alone certain. He cited four reasons for this: a lack of sufficient credible witnesses, the tendency of people to believe extraordinary stories, miracles occurring only amongst uncivilised peoples, and miracles occurring in all religions and therefore not supporting one religion's truth claims over another.

He held that Christianity required faith, but could not be believed by anyone on the basis of reason.

Answering the deists

Although history generally assumes that these propositions were unanswerable, this betrays an ignorance of the sophisticated and cogent replies that were given by Christians at the time.

In answer to Spinoza, Jacob Vernet wrote that only experience leads us to believe that nature is unchangeable, but that this does not give us any reason to think it cannot change. Natural events depend on the will of God, who can make exceptions to the general order of things if and when he chooses. The course of nature 'is not the effect of a blind necessity but of a free Cause who interrupts and suspends it when He pleases.' [8]

Claude Francois Houtteville rejoined that natural law is not a necessary extension of God's nature, but that he is free to establish it in whatever way he chooses. Furthermore, he could change his laws if he wanted to.

Hume had the misfortune of being comprehensively rebutted by William Paley, whose *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* was so influential that it was compulsory reading for Cambridge University applicants until the 20th century! Against Hume's first argument, Paley responded that the unchangeability of the natural order was far from proven. Even if our own limited experience leads us to believe that nature operates uniformly, this is a far cry from saying that universal experience absolutely denies the miraculous. To claim as much is begging the question (ie assuming the answer to a question without making any attempt to prove it), for which finite being can legitimately appeal to 'universal experience'? It stands to reason that if God exists he would want to reveal himself, and use the miraculous to do it. If he used certain miracles to authenticate his revelation (eg at the inauguration of Christianity), this would be quite consistent with us not seeing the same miracles today, as they were for a particular purpose at a particular time.

In response to Hume's supposed lack of evidence for miracles, Paley agreed that much care is needed in treating claims of the miraculous. However, he stressed the need to see such claims in

their theological and historical context. When seen this way, he said, the miracles of the gospels are without parallel and the evidence is excellent. We will return to this later.

The above summary is useful to see something of how western society began to turn away from belief in the miraculous. Of course, many of our peers in medicine today are not deists but naturalists; they no longer believe in a remote God who set the universe running and watches from afar, but rather deny the existence of God altogether.

Contemporary questions

Very few of our friends will quote Spinoza or Hume, although their thinking has had a profound influence. The alternative explanations for miracles we get today are phrased differently.

Miracles have natural explanations

Some events in the Bible are now known to have natural causes, or at least natural causes can be suggested. The rainbow after the flood was said to be a sign from God,[9] yet we know that rainbows are caused by the refraction of light through water drops in the atmosphere. Other suggestions include Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed by a volcano,[10] the Red Sea parting because of a strong wind[11] or the Jordan river drying up because of a landslide.[12]

But natural explanations in no way discount God's activity. The Bible presents God as the sustainer of the universe[13] who covers the sky with clouds, supplies the earth with rain, makes the grass grow and sends the snow, frost, hail and breezes.[14] God works in and through natural events and they are part of his providence, his general rather than specific activity.

Where there may be a natural explanation for miraculous events, often the timing points to God's activity and oversight. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the parting of the Red Sea and the drying up of the Jordan river came at exactly the right time to demonstrate God's power in judging evil or guiding and protecting his people. Another example is that of the coin found in the fish's mouth.[15] There is a fish in the Sea of Galilee to this day known as St Peter's fish. Eaten locally, they are often caught with objects such as bottle caps or coins in their mouths. This in itself was not miraculous; the striking part was that the very first fish pulled out by Peter after Jesus' instruction should be the right kind with the right coin in its mouth.

Despite possible 'natural' causes for some events, there are many biblical miracles where there can be no natural explanation. A stick turning into a snake,[16] an iron axe-head floating[17] and of course the resurrection of Jesus' body after a grisly execution and around 36 hours in a tomb. These cannot be explained away as coincidences and if true are clearly supernatural events.

Miracles break the laws of nature

This argument, favoured by the deists, is also often used today. Yet it is based on a misunderstanding. Scientific observation records the way that things usually operate, and theories and laws are built up around this. Often these need to be modified in the light of later observations. For example, Einstein's theory of relativity explained the behaviour of small particles moving near the speed of light in a way that Newton's laws of motion could not. A single fact can disprove a well established theory.

But it is a great leap of faith to argue that because things normally happen a certain way, they can only happen that way. Talk of laws implies the presence of a lawgiver, and if laws are established by a supernatural agent, then they could also be modified or temporarily suspended for a purpose.

'I've never seen a miracle'

Miracles should be rare events by their very nature. It's therefore not surprising if we have never witnessed one ourselves. But should this make us doubt their existence? I have never seen a case of Weil's disease, but when a man came to me in the emergency department, complaining of some of the symptoms and informing me that he worked near rat-infested water, I was obliged to include

it in my differential diagnosis! I trusted my medical textbooks that such a disease existed despite my having no experience of it. In the end he turned out not to have it, but I would have been foolish to deny the possibility.

Likewise with miracles, we should weigh the testimony of those who claim to have experienced one and not discount it because we weren't there. It would be foolish for a Somalian woman to deny that snow existed just because she had never seen it in her village!

We spend much of our lives accepting the testimony of other people about events or facts that we cannot verify ourselves. If a claim seems unusual or extraordinary, that should of course make us cautious before accepting it, but if the evidence is sound then we are obliged to take it seriously.

There's no evidence for miracles

Once the other objections are cleared away, this is what it really all comes down to. If God actually exists then miracles must be possible, even probable. Our problem then becomes, how do we establish in a given situation if a miracle has occurred; specifically how should a sincere non-believer investigate the miracle claims of the Bible?

Closely related to the issue of evidence for biblical miracles is that of biblical authority and reliability. It is unreasonable to ask a non-believer to begin by treating the Bible or the Gospels as the written Word of God. But it is entirely reasonable to ask them to treat the Bible as a highly reliable source of ancient history. The evidence to support the historicity and trustworthiness of the Bible is such that seriously to doubt the Bible on historical grounds would lead to rejecting virtually all ancient historical documents, as the Bible (particularly the New Testament) has far better manuscripts and supporting evidence than any other comparable ancient documents. This has been dealt with elsewhere in *Nucleus*.^[18] Once the Bible is accepted as trustworthy history, then the evidence can be looked at fairly.

Evidence for the resurrection

A natural place to begin is by examining the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. This is one of the chief miracles of Christianity (along with the incarnation, where God became man in Jesus) and as Paul reminds us, our faith stands or falls on this.^[19] It receives ample coverage in the New Testament and can therefore be closely examined from several different angles. Although the resurrection appears incredible, it is based on very solid evidence.

First, no-one disputed the fact that Jesus died on the cross. He was seen to breathe his last by eye-witnesses,^[20] and was certified dead by Roman soldiers whose very business was killing.^[21] They decided not to break Jesus' legs (customary practice to hasten death in crucifixion), because they were convinced he was dead already;^[22] and this was confirmed by the observation of 'blood and water' (separated cells and serum) coming from his pierced side.^[23] This only occurs as a post-mortem event.

The so-called 'swoon' theory, that Jesus may have only fainted and then revived in the cool of the tomb, is much more difficult to substantiate. It involves believing that a man beaten to within an inch of his life, impaled on a cross and then wrapped in 75lb of bandages and spices (rather like a plaster cast) could somehow unwrap himself, push away a one ton boulder, single-handedly overcome an armed guard and then persuade over 500 others that he had conquered death. The foolishness of this position is evidenced by the fact that no-one dared suggest the possibility until centuries later. Would Christ, the model of integrity, really deceive his followers by claiming he had risen when he knew he hadn't? Apart from the testimony of eye-witnesses, no secular historian at the time (eg Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus and Lucian) doubted that Jesus died.

Second, the body was gone. If the Jews had removed it (Mary's immediate assumption)^[24] then they would simply have reproduced it at the first rumour of resurrection. If the disciples had removed it, they would not have subsequently been prepared to die for what they knew had not happened. In any case, the tomb was heavily guarded,^[25] and they had all run for their lives when Jesus was arrested.^[26] Pilgrims never flocked to Jesus' tomb. It was empty.

Third, the post-resurrection appearances were impressive. Despite Jesus' repeated predictions that he would rise from the dead,[27] all his followers first thought of other explanations for the missing corpse. What convinced them? Mary,[28] the twelve disciples,[29] the followers on the Emmaus road,[30] Paul[31] and 500 others[32] became convinced when they saw him. Some have suggested hallucinations as an alternative explanation; but hallucinations do not occur with varied groups, on multiple occasions, in different places, over a period of several weeks. Hallucinations don't light real beach fires or eat real fish either, but Jesus did![33]

Fourth, one has to account for the rapid spread of Christianity after Christ's death. Most of the twelve disciples later died for their belief that Jesus was God. Although dying for a belief does not make it true, the point is this: they came to believe in Christ's divinity after being convinced that he really had risen from the dead. It was this conviction that transformed them from fearful cowards into the bold apostles who literally turned the world upside down. The survival and growth of the early church resulted from the unshakeable belief that Jesus was alive.

Fifth is the personal experience of Christians, generations of people who have come to know Jesus as a person, with whom they enjoy a genuine friendship. Christianity is not just a creed to be followed nor an ideology to be embraced; it is a dynamic relationship with a real living God - through Jesus Christ.

Biblical background

This is not the place for a full biblical theology of miracles, but there are several points that are of relevance and can be dealt with briefly. We have already mentioned William Paley's assertion that the theological and historical context of a miracle is crucial to its interpretation and believability, and this is very important.

First, miracles have a purpose. God is not in the business of doing the miraculous simply to amaze and astound people. Jesus refused to perform miracles to satisfy people's curiosity.[34] Instead, miracles are to confirm the authority of those sent by God[35] and to testify to the truth of the revelation they bring.[36]

Second, although God ultimately stands behind all that happens, supernatural agents other than God (eg angels) can perform miracles. A miraculous event can even come from Satan to lead people astray. If a miracle is performed that encourages us to abandon authentic biblical truth and the gospel, we are to reject it.[37]

Third, there seems to be in Scripture a principle that miracles increase around periods where a new era of God's revelation is being inaugurated (eg Moses and the Exodus, Elijah and the beginning of the prophetic age, Jesus and the apostles). They did not cease at other periods in the Bible, but were less frequent. This therefore is another reason why a lack of observed miracles today should not prompt anyone to deny the miracles recorded in these periods of frequent miraculous activity.

There is also the question of miraculous healing today. Although both authors are open to God's working in miraculous ways today, there is a real need for Christian doctors to have clarity, honesty and the ability to ask the right questions when faced with contemporary miracle claims, many of which sadly turn out to be false. It can be easy to claim that a particular case is a miracle, when actually there may be several factors operating. A recent CMF article examined this problem.[38]

Conclusion

The modern western mindset mocks the idea of rational, medical people believing in miracles. Much of this stems back to the discredited theories of the 17th and 18th century deists such as Spinoza and Hume. Yet both these and the contemporary objections to miracles can all be dealt with.

If we claim to be Christians then we can neither escape nor deny the miraculous; nor should we wish to. In accepting the existence of a personal creator God who wishes to reveal himself to us, we should affirm that miracles are a natural and logical way to do this. The evidence for the

resurrection of Jesus is excellent and if discussion of miracles prompts us to talk about the resurrection, we are both on certain ground and a great topic!

References

1. Based on the Confident Christianity evangelism training course, online at www.cmf.org.uk/evang/conf/intro.htm. Other apologetics topics were covered in the 'Deadly Questions' series from October 2001 to October 2002. See **Nucleus**
2. Gn 1
3. Ex 7-11
4. Jos 10:1-15
5. Bultmann R. *New Testament and Mythology*, in *Kerygma and Myth: a theological debate*. Bartsch HW (ed), Fuller RH (trans). New York: Harper & Row, 1961:5
6. 1 Cor 15:14
7. This section is summarised from Craig WL. *Reasonable Faith - Christian truth and apologetics*. Wheaton: Crossway, 1994:127- 155
8. Quoted in Craig WL. *Op cit*:134
9. Gn 9:12-17
10. Gn 19:23-29
11. Ex 14:21,22
12. Jos 3:14-17
13. Heb 1:3
14. Ps 147:8-18
15. Mt 17:24-27
16. Ex 4:2-4
17. 2 Ki 6:6
18. Pickering M, Saunders P. *Deadly Questions - Isn't the Bible full of errors?* Nucleus 2002; April:32-38
19. 1 Cor 15:14
20. Lk 23:46, Jn 19:35
21. Mk 15:44,45
22. Jn 19:31-33
23. Jn 19:34
24. Jn 20:2
25. Mt 27:62-66
26. Mt 26:56
27. Eg Mt 16:21; 20:17-19
28. Jn 20:10-18
29. Jn 20:24-31
30. Lk 24:13-35
31. Acts 9:1-19
32. 1 Cor 15:6
33. Jn 21:1-14
34. Mt 12:38,39; 13:58
35. 2 Cor 12:12
36. Heb 2:3,4
37. Dt 13:1-5
38. Burke B. *Looking for a Miracle*. Triple Helix 2004; Summer:10,11

Further Reading

- Craig WL. Reasonable Faith - Christian truth and apologetics. Wheaton: Crossway, 1994:127-155 - an excellent treatment of the historical background and philosophical issues.
- Lewis CS. Miracles. London: Fount, 2002 - a reprinted classic.
- Sire JW. The Universe Next Door. Leicester: IVP, 1997 - a brilliant summary of worldviews; particularly the chapter on deism.

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