

Miracles Are Possible and Credible²⁴

Undoubtedly, one of the major stumbling blocks to be to becoming a Christian for many today is that Christianity is a religion of miracles. It asserts that God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, being born of a virgin, that he performed various miracles, exorcised demonic beings, and that, having died by crucifixion he rose from the dead. But the problem is that these sorts of miraculous events seem to belong to a worldview foreign to modern man – a pre-scientific, Superstitious worldview belonging to the ancient and middle ages. –*William Lane Craig*

I. The importance of the Matter

- a. If miracles are impossible, Christianity is false**
- b. If miracles are impossible, the Bible cannot be trusted**
- c. If miracles are impossible, there is no way to adequately explain reality**
- d. If miracles are impossible, Christ did not raise from the dead (see I Cor 15:12 – 19)**

II. What is a “Miracle”

a. Definition

A “miracle” is divine intervention/interruption into the regular course of events in the natural world; it is a special act of God that produces a purposeful event in the world which would not or could not have occurred otherwise.²⁵

A miracle is “a striking event brought about (usually by God) for a religious purpose, against the usual course of nature; for example, the resurrection or instantaneous healings recorded in the Christian gospels.”²⁶

²⁴ Joseph Holden, Apologetic Evangelism Class notes, Calvary Chapel Bible College Fall 2004

²⁵ See N.L. Geisler, Baker’s Encyclopedia of Apologetics, 450.

²⁶ John Bowker, ed., The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 644.

“A genuine miracle is an unusual event in that it is not a mere producer of so-called natural laws...A genuine miracle accomplishes some practical and benevolent work.”²⁷

“An action of God or His messengers that runs counter to observed processes of nature.”²⁸

“The distinctive thing in the miraculous deed is that it results from the exercise of the supernatural power of God. And this means, of course, that it is not brought about by secondary causes that operate according to the laws of nature.”²⁹

b. Important things to note concerning the above definition

1. A miracle is a divine intervention into the natural world (transcendent source.)
2. A miracle is a special act of God that produces a *purposeful* event (this distinguishes *unusual* events from miraculous events)
3. A miracle could not or would not occur on its own (this distinguishes *naturalism* from *supernaturalism*)

c. Characteristics of a genuine miracle

1. They are always **instantaneous**, never gradual
2. They are always **successful**
3. There is **no known relapse** after a genuine biblical miracle
4. They **bring glory** to God (John 9:3) by:
 - a. By conveying His message and will (MK 2:1-12 – forgiveness)
 - b. Confirming His word (MK 16:19-20; Heb 2:3-4)

²⁷ Henry Theissen, Lectures in Systematic Theology, revised (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1949, 1977, 1979), 11.

²⁸ Terry L. Miethe, The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1988) 138.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, combined edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932, 1938, 1996), 176.

5. They were **specific**, not vague (e.g. bad back, ear ache, etc...) If false teachers *appear* to work “miracles,” there are other plausible explanations for them:
 - a. Anomaly
 - b. Magic
 - c. Mind over matter (psychosomatic illness)
 - d. Special providence
 - e. Power of suggestion
 - f. Star status of the teacher/preacher
 - g. Hypnotism (montras)
6. They possess a doctrinal, moral, purpose, and fit the context

III. Why do Christians Need to Defend Biblical Miracles?

a. Because Christianity rests on the miracle of the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus guarantees several things:

1. His power over death (Acts 2:31)
2. His ability to fulfill His promise to resurrect all Christians (1 Cor. 15:20-23)
3. That Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 1:4)

Without this confirming miracle (Rom 1:4) believers through the ages have no assurance of Christ’s promises or that Christianity is true (1 Cor. 15). Without the resurrection, Christianity is placed on the same ground as other world religions.

b. Because Miracles often serve as outward signs that points to an unseen reality (Empirical verifiability)

Jesus said, “But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins...I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home,” (MK 2:10-12).

In the final analysis, faith in Jesus Christ is not a *leap in the dark*, but rather a *step into the light*. This is what separates Jesus from the host of others such as Buddha, Confucius, Krishna, and Dali Lama. They have given us no indication by confirming signs that their message is true and should be believed.

c. Because miracles confirm the person and message of God (Bible)

What the Bible says about the use of miracles:

1. God's message to Pharaoh through Moses was confirmed by miracles (Ex 4:1-9)
2. Jesus' as Messiah was confirmed by miracles (Mt 13:38-39; Rom 1:4)
3. Peter said Jesus was confirmed by miracles (Acts 2:22)
4. Paul used miracles to establish his apostleship (2 Cor. 12:12)
5. God "bore witness by signs and wonders" the message to the Hebrews (Heb 2:2-4)
6. Mark said, "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. Amen," (Mk 16:20)

d. Because miracles may help lead others to Christ

1. **Nathaniel (Jn 1)**
2. **Thomas (Jn 20:26ff)**
3. **Nicodemus (Jn 3)**
4. **Paul (Acts 9)**
5. **Witnesses (Heb 2:3-4)**

IV. Arguments against the possibility and Credibility of Miracles

a. Are miracles impossible?

No. Miracles are possible, especially in light of a closer examination of faulty arguments against them. The question as to whether miracles are possible is not a historical question, it is philosophical one. That is to ask, can they occur?

The current skeptical views that exist concerning miracles did not arise through twentieth-century higher criticism of the Bible, rather it came to prominence two-hundred years earlier during the period known as the European Enlightenment (c. 1688-1788). During that time, the attack marshaled against the possibility of miracles came from the deists hiding behind the backdrop of the “Newtonian World-Machine.” However, it wasn’t a deist who presented the most potent argument against the possibility of miracles, it was the Jewish pantheist, Benedict De Spinoza (see *Theologico-Politico Treatise*, 1670).

Summary of Spinoza’s Argument against miracles:

1. Miracles are a violation of the laws of nature
2. The laws of nature are unchangeable
3. It is impossible for unchanging laws to be violated
4. Therefore, miracles are impossible

Christian Response to Spinoza’ Argument:

1. Natural laws are not prescriptive and descriptive. They don’t tell how the universe must operate; they simply describe how the universe usually operates. The laws of nature are not prescriptive of unchangeable patterns; they are descriptive of general events.
2. If this is the case, then miracles are not violations of, they are exceptions to the laws of nature
3. Whatever is not unchangeable can have exceptions
4. Therefore, miracles can occur

b. Are miracles credible?

Yes, if one is talking about biblical miracles, especially in light of the evidence. The credibility question deals with “whether one should believe in them.” These people do not deny that miracles can occur, they see no justification for believing in them based on the limited evidence, they are simply not credible. This argument uses evidence from “experience” to show that miracles do not line up with our everyday encounters. In other words,

there is more evidence against miracles, namely, that we experience the non-miraculous (i.e. regular events) more than we do the miraculous (i.e. irregular singularity). Experience tells us that miracles are unbelievable because of our lack of contact with them. For example, have you witnessed a resurrection, blindness healed, someone walking on water, etc? In the final analysis, they say it would be foolish to believe that miracles occurred in the past since our *non-experience* of them is greater than our experience with them.

Again, this argument against the credibility of miracles did not originate with modern atheists, it was developed by David Hume (1711-1776) in his *Inquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, section 10, 1748)

Summary of Hume's Argument against the Credibility of Miracles:

1. Miracles are a violation of the laws of nature
2. Unalterable experience has established these laws
3. The wise man proportions his belief to the evidence that human experience provides
4. Therefore, the wise man should never believe a miracle has occurred unless the evidence for a particular miracle is greater than the evidence provided by the uniform experience of mankind.

Christian response to Hume:

1. First, Hume begins where Spinoza did by wrongfully assuming the laws of nature are fixed and unchangeable.
2. Second, Hume falsely assumes that human experience is *uniform*. For no one could claim to know that experience is uniform unless he knows that all reports of miracles past, present, and future are false.

C.S. Lewis wrote concerning Hume's argument asserting:

Now of course we must agree with Hume that if these is absolutely ‘uniform experience’ against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately, we know that experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all reports of them are false. And we know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.

–C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 105

3. Christians would agree with Hume that one should believe based on the evidence. However, Christians must differ with him when he assumes that the evidence for *regular events* is always greater than the evidence for *singular events* (miracles). How many of us have experienced the origin of the universe, Abraham Lincoln’s birth, or even the events of history that have only occurred once? If Hume’s logic is correct, we must also reject other singular events likened to those mentioned above.

Further, Hume makes a fundamental flaw when viewing evidences. He adds the evidence instead of weighing the evidence. He added the quantity of experiences instead of weighing the quality of experience. For example, ten witnesses who did not see the crime does not outweigh the one witness who did. If this was not the case, our prisons would be empty since there are quantitatively more people who do not witness a specific crime than those who do.

V. Science and Miracles

a. Is science the ultimate test for truth?

Western culture has benefited tremendously by the advances of science. Science is viewed by many as being the only field which is interested in truth and by which beliefs can be rationally assessed. Today, we are told, that “everything is brought before the bar of science to be evaluated.” The recent successes in technology, medicine, meteorology, and agriculture have been impressive to such an extent, it has led many to say “**only what can**

be know by science or quantified and empirically (visually) tested is rational and true.” This statement virtually eliminates Christianity’s major characteristics and miracles claims from being “rational and true” since many of its characteristics cannot be repeatedly tested through empirical means with the scientific method.

However, upon closer examination, J.P. Moreland of Talbot Seminary reveals three fundamental flaws with this reasoning.

1. First, the statement is self-defeating. The statement itself cannot be empirically tested or qualified mathematically.
2. Second, the statement is not statement *of* science, it is a philosophical statement *about* science. And if it is not a statement of science, then it cannot be considered rational or true by the statements own standards. Science cannot be justified buy science anymore than one can pull himself up by his own boot straps. Science must appeal to something *outside* of science to justify itself just its claims, namely, reality.
3. Finally, the scientist assumes certain things as “rational and true” that cannot be tested by operation science. For example, scientist believe that they ought to report their test results “honestly”. This implies morality which cannot be scientifically tested. Further, they assume that *numbers* are real, that the laws of logic are true, that *language* has meaning, and that *truth-telling* is virtue. All these are categories that serve as the basis *for* science but cannot be tested *by* science.

Therefore, if “only that which can be tested by science is rational and true,” and the basis of science rests on what cannot be tested by science (numbers, logic, morality, etc.), science is not rational or true.

b. Does science and the Bible Contradict each other?

Difficulties yes, contradictions no! Many have hastily claimed that science and the Bible are incompatible and are mutually exclusive domains. This claim has arisen for two reasons.

1. A misunderstanding of “alleged” unscientific passages in Scripture
2. A misunderstanding of the *relationships* between science and the Bible.

7 Reasons for this misunderstanding:

- a. The assumption that the Bible is true *only* when speaking about religious matters (fact/value split – Jn 3:12)
- b. The assumption that miracles are impossible
- c. Failure to understand that both theology and science are *interpretive disciplines* subject to error which inevitably will conflict (scientists believe earth was eternal and Roman Catholic scholars had believed that the Sun revolved around the Earth).
- d. Failure to understand that the Bible *is not a scientific text book*, and should not be held to modern technical standards.
- e. Failure to understand that the Bible reveals *partial* scientific truths and not always complete ones. Nevertheless, a partial truth is still true. (Ex: Gen 1:1 – universe had a beginning)
- f. Failure to understand that the Bible uses and employs *observational* rather than astronomical language (“sunrise” and “sunset”).
- g. Failure to understand that the unexplainable may *yet* be explained

Note: There can be no real contradiction between the domain of science (nature) and the domain of theology (Bible) because they are two different kinds of revelation (general and special) from the same God. The only real

conflicts or contradictions that exist between science and the Bible are *interpretative*.

c. The Bible has demonstrated remarkable consistency with science

Christians claim that the Bible is the Word of God. If this claim is true, one would expect certain unique qualities within it that would set it apart from other books. One of these unique qualities the Bible possesses is scientific knowledge about the heavens and earth 2000 to 3000 years before its time. Much of which runs contrary to the surrounding cultures at that time.

The following are examples:

1. The existence of water paths (currents) in the seas (Ps 8:8)
2. The ocean contains underwater springs (Gen 7:11; Job 38:16; Prov 8:28)
3. The ocean floor contains deep valleys (Ps 18:15; 2Sam 22:16; Job 38:16)
4. The ocean contains towering mountains (Jonah 2:6)
5. Allowing the land to lie unplowed every seventh year (Ex. 23:10-11). Scientists have found that this practice allows the ground to replenish itself.
6. The heavens (stars) cannot be measured (Gen 15:5; Jer 31:37)
7. Outer space (heavens) is called the “expanse” or “spreading out” which is consistent with the expanding universe (Gen 1:8, 14-17)
8. The heavens and the earth had a beginning (Gen 1:1)
9. The earth will eventually wear out (Second Law of Thermodynamics) (Ps 102:26; Isa 51:6)
10. The earth is spherical (Isa 40:22)
11. The earth is suspended in nothing (Job 26:7)
12. All living things reproduce after its own kind (Gen 1:21; 6:19)

VI. Conclusion

Miracles can be a powerful piece of evidence in confirming the message of Christianity. Although there are other religions that claim their message has been confirmed by alleged miracles, Christianity stands alone when viewing the evidence. Specific prophecy, the character of eyewitnesses, the unique kinds of miracles, and the recording of the actual events close to the time when they occurred (closer than any other religion) served to elevate Christianity not only above the pagan cults of the first century, but also above the world religions today.³⁰

Sources and Books on Miracles:

Brown, Colin, *Miracles and the Critical Mind*

Geisler, Norman L., *Miracles and the Modern Mind* (Baker); *Signs and Wonders*

Geivett, Douglas, and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles* (IVP)

Johnson, Phillip E., *Reason In the Balance* (IVP)

_____, *Darwin On Trial*

Lewis, C.S., *Miracles*

Morris, Henry M., *The Biblical Basis for Modern Science* (Baker)

Moreland, J.P., *Science and Christianity*

³⁰ The information contained herein was derived and expanded from Geisler, Norman, *Signs and Wonders* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1988); *Miracles and the Modern Mind*. Also from CRI "Jean Dixon and Prophecy."