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December 23, 2006

Miracles and New Testament Studies

By [James Arlandson](#)

In an [article](#) about Jesus by Jon Meacham, the editor of *Newsweek*, he asserts that Jesus starts out as a human Jewish prophet, but that the Church in the first four centuries turned him into the majestic Messiah and worldwide Savior. He goes from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. Meacham's lengthy title and subtitle outlines the process:

From Jesus to Christ: How did a Jewish prophet come to be seen as the Christian savior?
The epic story of the empty tomb, the early battles, and the making of a great faith.

Though Meacham's rationalist version of church history was written recently (March 2005), it has been circulating for over two hundred years, and it will crop up again and again.

Meacham assumes without question that Jesus is merely a man with a prophetic gift, but in an epic battle of ideas, sometimes backed up with the sword of Constantine, the Church promoted Jesus to a deified status, even though history does not support and even cannot demonstrate this status. Meacham says that the Church "made" a great faith; he thus implies that the Church did not receive it from the reliable and non-mythological New Testament that tells us accurately who Jesus is—the Christ, the Son of the living God. Meacham separates off history from faith in his title and subtitle.

Where do Meacham's assumption and dichotomy between history and faith come from? Will modern man or woman accept that Jesus is the Christ of faith and history, during his lifetime, one and the same?

Answering these questions would go a long way in challenging modern rationalistic interpretations dominating certain wings of New Testament scholarship, which is based firmly on an antimiracles presupposition.

Enlightened Hyper-skepticism

The Enlightenment (c. 1600-1800+) shook western civilization down to its foundation. Taking their cue from ancient Greek skeptics, philosophers like David Hume (1711-1776) and François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire) (1694-1778) advanced skepticism.

Enlightenment hyper-skepticism influences New Testament scholarship either directly or indirectly, perhaps mostly indirectly. Anthony Flew, a modern defender of Hume, in a chapter fortifying Hume's opposition to miracles, cites an observation from another philosopher, C. S. Pierce.

C. S. Pierce once remarked: "The whole of modern 'higher criticism' of ancient history in general, and of Biblical history in particular, is based on the same logic used by Hume." (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, p. 179)

Pierce is absolutely right about this. Scholars of the New Testament during and shortly after the Enlightenment accepted the closed natural system of cause and effect proclaimed by Enlightenment philosophers. Here are examples of cause and effect: humans talking causes sound (effect). Gravity causes unhindered objects to fall earthwards (effect).

Next, naturalism says that the world of nature-even the entire universe-is the Only Fact, hence the name naturalism (or physicalism or materialism). Can miracles happen in this (allegedly) closed system? Apparently not.

Hume spends a large number of pages in his masterpiece *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* discussing cause and effect. The foundation of human knowledge concerning matters of fact (e.g. the sun rises; salt dissolves in water), as opposed to relations of ideas (e.g. proofs in geometry) is experience with cause and effect, he says. And the foundation of this is the accumulation of many experiences with cause and effect. And the foundation of this is mere custom or habit (Hume, pp. 25-47). How do miracles fit into this system?

If miracles happen-and they do not for Hume-then they would be violations or transgressions of the laws of nature. He writes in his essay on Miracles (Section X):

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as 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. (p. 114)

A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent. (p. 115, note 1, emphasis original)

Hume uses, as it were, a two-sided scale, like the scales of justice on the outside of the Supreme Court building. On one side he places our firm and unalterable experience with the laws of nature; on the other he places the reliable testimony for miracles. The first side is always heavier or wins the contest over the reports about miracles. "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence" (p. 110).

Voltaire, in his *Philosophical Dictionary* and his entry on miracles, discusses the views of natural philosophers. "Here are their arguments." Then he begins with a definition of miracles that is acceptable to them:

A miracle is the violation of the divine, immutable, eternal law of mathematics. By this very definition a miracle is a contradiction in terms. A law cannot be at once immutable and violated. (p. 311)

However, at the end of the same article on miracles he acknowledges that all Christians (does he include himself?) agree that the miracles of Christ and the apostles are "incontestably veridical" (p. 316). Christians may believe this, but whether Voltaire himself believes this or not, the die has been cast. Many Enlightenment philosophers, and New Testament scholars following them, accept this definition, as well as Hume's.

For such philosophers, then, the world we live in is a closed natural system of cause and effect. Thus, when reports of miracles are written, such as the Virgin Birth found in the New Testament, then we ask this question: Which is more probable? Did the early church uncritically accept legends abounding in the Greco-Roman world, or did the miracle happen? A rationalist accepts the first option as more probable.

So it was up to New Testament scholars like David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), to cite only these two examples, to separate historical fact from "myth" without destroying timeless truths that may be embedded in the "myths" of the New Testament documents, particularly the Four Gospels.

However, can it be rightly said that as the early Christians (allegedly) accepted too much "legend" and "myth," so also modern scholars accept too much skepticism, ironically?

David Friedrich Strauss

Strauss's book *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846) caused a firestorm, since it was so radical. He was promptly dismissed from his post at Tübingen University. It seems that he absorbs skeptical German Biblical scholarship specifically and western scholarship generally; or perhaps he largely ignites it, as seen here:

Our modern world, on the contrary [to "immediate agency (of God) at every step"], after many centuries of tedious research, has attained a conviction, that all things are linked together by a chain of causes and effects, which suffers no interruption . . . the totality of finite things forms a vast circle, which, except that it owes its existence and laws to a superior power, suffers no intrusion from without (p. 78, section 14).

From this quotation it seems that Strauss does not exclude a "superior power" completely, but in practical terms this power does not work miracles. Hume would agree with Strauss's belief in a closed system "that suffers no intrusion from without [the outside]." Thus, Strauss offers a criterion by which to distinguish the historical from the unhistorical in the Gospels.

First. When the narration is irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events. Now according to these laws, agreement with all just

philosophical conception and all credible experience, the absolute cause never disturbs the chain of secondary causes by single arbitrary acts of interposition . . . When therefore we meet with an account of certain phenomena or events of which it is either expressly stated or implied that they were produced by God himself (divine apparitions-voices from heaven and the like), or by human beings possessed of supernatural powers (miracles, prophecies), such an account is *in so far* to be considered as not historical (p. 88, section 16, emphasis original).

Thus, if an account in the Gospels includes a miracle, then the account is unhistorical. This skepticism about historical reports of miracles is exactly Hume's point, as we shall see in the next article in the series.

But why can we not justly accuse the authors of the Gospels of fabrication? They lived in a different time from Strauss's, he says. Following the (apparently) gullible age of the first century and later, they uncritically accepted too much.

It is impossible, in a critical and enlightened age like our own, to carry ourselves back to a period of civilization in which the imagination worked so powerfully, that its illusions were believed as realities by the very minds that created them (p. 83, section 14)

Strauss goes on to say how much power the person of Jesus worked on the imagination of his followers. The popular hope of the Jewish people generally in a Messianic era was "to be full of signs and wonders" (p. 84, section 14). Miraculous events and prophecies were expected of the Messiah, and Jesus was that Messiah; therefore these things happened to him.

In no case could it be easier for the person who first added any new feature to the description of Jesus [in the Gospels and other early writings], to believe himself its genuineness . . . (p. 84, section 14).

This fits into Strauss's critique of a founder of modern theological liberalism: *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History: a Critique of Schleiermacher's Life of Jesus* (1865). Note how the Christ of faith is separated from the Jesus of history in the title. This move is based squarely on an antimiracles presupposition noted in the excerpts above and here. Strauss writes:

Schleiermacher's Christ is as little a real man as is the Christ of the church. By means of a truly critical treatment of the Gospels one reaches Christ as little as he does the church's Christ. The illusion, which is supported primarily by Schleiermacher's explanations, that Jesus could have been a man in the full sense and still as a single person stand above the whole of humanity, is the chain which still blocks the harbor of Christian theology against the open sea of rational science. To break this chain is the purpose of the present work, as it has always been of all my theological writings. (p. 5)

If Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is too traditional for Strauss, then this clearly reveals how radical Strauss really is. Schleiermacher is known as the "father of modern liberal Protestant theology." In any case, one cannot find the divine Christ in "a truly critical treatment of the Gospels." The Christ of the church and the Gospels is an "illusion." Such theology blocks the harbor from "rational science."

So Strauss conforms to his own skeptical age, whereas the early Christians conformed to their (allegedly) naïve age. He has a strong motive to make Christianity appealing to his modern times, so miracles must be excluded or at least reinterpreted as myths containing timeless truths. We today know better than the ancients, especially the primitives in first-century Israel, whose desperation for a Messiah propelled them into fictions that for them were nonetheless true. Strauss must break the chain that hinders "rational science" from intruding into theology and New Testament studies.

Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann picks up where Strauss (and others not dealt with here) left off. Bultmann was one of the most prominent and influential New Testament scholars of the twentieth century. For him the New Testament worldview that includes miracles is no longer believable.

In the article "New Testament and Mythology" (1941) he states that science and technology makes the "world picture" (read: the myths) of the New Testament implausible:

Experience and control of the world have developed to such an extent through science and technology that no one can or does seriously maintain the New Testament world picture. What sense does it make to confess today "he descended into hell" or "he ascended into heaven," if the confessor no longer shares the underlying mythical world picture of a three-story world? (p. 4)

He adds in the same vein on the same page:

We cannot use electrical lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament. (p. 4)

In the same article he says that we should not believe in the Resurrection:

But we cannot understand a miraculous natural event such as the resuscitation of a dead man- quite apart from its being generally incredible-as an act of God that is in this sense of concern to us. (p. 7)

In a series of lectures delivered at US seminaries in 1951, he reinforces the presupposition that the New Testament worldview is mythical.

The whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in

the New Testament generally is mythological; i.e., the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth, and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of event; and the conception of miracles, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits. (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 15)

The central idea found in that quotation may or may not be borrowed from Hume directly, but it is surely Humean in spirit. Then Bultmann dips his feet into philosophy about cause and effect, a dominant theme in Hume's epistemology (how we acquire and define knowledge).

In the modern conception of the world, the cause-and-effect nexus [connection] is fundamental. Although modern physical theories take account of chance in the chain of cause and effect in subatomic phenomena, our daily living, purposes and actions are not affected. In any case, modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers. (p. 15)

Hume would need clarification on the phrases "cause-and-effect nexus" and "chain of cause and effect," but Bultmann's declaration is clear. Miracles actually happening should be excluded from any interpretation of the New Testament—even a theological one, not to mention an historical one—because modern science renders such primitive conceptions obsolete. Hume would agree.

Finally, Bultmann says in "On the Problem of Demythologizing" (1952) that a being that works a miracle is conceived as a worldly power projected onto the plane of worldly occurrences.

For [the mythical concept of wonder or miracle] represents the working of transcendent [otherworldly] power (the action of God) as an occurrence that at once breaks through the natural or psychological course of occurrences and links them together. Transcendent causality is inserted into the causal chain of events in the world, and a power that in this sense works a miracle is conceived, for better or worse, as a worldly power and projected onto the plane of worldly occurrences. (p. 98).

So what is the goal of demythologizing? It is to know the "benefits" of Christ. Bultmann writes in the same article:

Accordingly, demythologizing of the biblical writings is criticism of the mythological world picture of the Bible . . . In point of fact, scientific thinking does not destroy the mythological world picture of the Bible . . . But demythologizing interpretation seeks through its criticism to bring out the real intention of the biblical writings. It sees that we cannot talk about God or what transcends the world as it is "in itself," because in doing so we would objectify God or the transcendent into immanent [counterpart of transcendence], worldly phenomenon. Demythologizing thus seeks to proceed according to Philipp Melancthon's dictum "To know Christ is to know his benefits" . . . Its criticism

of the biblical writings lies not in eliminating mythological statements but interpreting them; it is not a process of subtraction but a hermeneutical method. (p. 99)

Demythologizing does not destroy the biblical writings, so says Bultmann, but winnows out the chaff of myths and miracles from the wheat of transcendent truths. But is the wheat a strictly human apocalyptic Jesus and the chaff the deity of Christ? If so, then the reversal is based squarely on an antimiracles presupposition.

Conclusion

Both Strauss and Bultmann were motivated to reinterpret the New Testament for the modern times they lived in, the scientific age. Maybe they can be commended for good intentions, but maybe not.

Regardless of their motives, the underlying assumption of Strauss's and Bultmann's viewpoint is hyper-skepticism about the supernatural. Though they may not deny God's existence, miracles simply do not-or cannot-happen. Why not? Because the age of science and technology denies them. There is a closed system, though perhaps some sort of (divine?) work may be done in the human heart through an encounter with the Christ of proclamation.

Nevertheless, the question remains: who is this "demythologized" Christ of faith / Jesus of Nazareth *now*? A dead "non-resurrected" spirit being who is somehow alive? A feeling? A pleasant thought or idea? Is he a Bodhisattva who can be reached only by long meditation or a whispered prayer? The wizard in the *Wizard of Oz*? Whoever we make him out to be? How does one have an encounter with such a being, if he or it exists, whatever or whoever he or it may be? Perhaps, though, if you believe in him or it, then your belief is not a lie. That is a paraphrase of the words of George Costanza in the sitcom *Seinfeld*. Costanza was informing Jerry Seinfeld on how to beat a lie detector test. If you believe it, it is not a lie, he told Jerry.

Truth-in-humor aside, let's step back and look at the big picture. What if some miracles described in the Bible happen today? What if the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk, immediately after prayer in Jesus' name? So decried by Strauss and Bultmann and others like them, these miracles, resembling Biblical miracles of healing, would in turn support the unique miracles of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, if miracles happen. They would certainly not disconfirm them. Modern miracles-in the age of science and technology-may turn on its head the demythologization of the New Testament. What if the healing miracles recorded there are all true or have a strong possibility of being true? Why would such miracles not soften or even flatly contradict the hyper-skepticism embodied in Strauss and Bultmann, if miracles indeed happen today?

Thus, can we challenge Strauss's and Bultmann's strong rationalism about the New Testament worldview that includes a "three-story cosmos"? What if the modern age of science and technology does not preclude miracles *a priori* (before investigation)?

The next four articles in this series explore these possibilities.

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December 24, 2006

Hume's Miracle Prison: How They Got Out Alive

By [James Arlandson](#)

One of the great geniuses of the Enlightenment was David Hume (1711-1776). In his essay on miracles (Section X) in his book *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, he doubts that miracles have ever occurred and even can occur.

Hume's short analysis shakes believers (for our purposes those who believe in miracles) and theists (for our purposes those who believe that God exists and acts in his creation). But skeptics (those who say that miracles do not or even cannot happen) gladly accept Hume's verdict.

However, do Hume's arguments stand up under close scrutiny? Can we exclude miracles as *a priori* impossible (*a priori* means before investigation)? That is, should we reject miracles outright? But what if miracles can be investigated with modern technology? Do they happen today?

This article has a modest goal. It aims to keep the door to miracles open, even after Hume's assault on them. It uses the metaphor of prison and the legal system to illustrate their escape into the modern skeptical world. They seem to be in hiding, but sometimes they peek out and show themselves today.

What is a miracle prison?

In Part II of Hume's discussion of miracles in Section X, he is in the process of answering the question of whether miracles do or even can occur. Is there even one criterion that any reasonable person can use to affirm their occurrence? Apparently not, for two major reasons. Bulleted examples follow each reason.

(1) No witness for the defense is reliable enough.

- No man, not even many, can be of "such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning" or can be of "such undoubted integrity" or of "such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind" that they can convince skeptics that the witnesses for miracles are not deluded or do not have "any design to deceive others" or are not exempt from self-interest and shame of being detected in promoting miracles (pp. 116-17).
- When the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of miracles, therefore, people of religion naturally or have a propensity to believe such things (p. 117).

- "A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality" (p. 117).
- An eloquent speaker may manipulate the masses (p. 118).
- Barbarous peoples in an unenlightened and bygone age produce the reports of miracles. But as we enter the civilizations of more enlightened peoples in recent times, the miracles, not surprisingly, dry up (pp. 119-21).

(2) No testimony is strong enough.

- Countless testimonies of forged miracles produce suspicion against all miracles; they also demonstrate how gullible people are (pp. 118-19; 125-27)
- Hume recounts "one of the best attested miracles in all profane [secular] history." The Emperor Vespasian healed a blind man and a lame man, as reported by Tacitus, whom Hume praises as reliable. But after all the confirmation of the miracles, "no evidence can well be supposed stronger for so gross and palpable falsehood" (pp. 122-23).
- Testimonies about the Cardinal de Retz also fall into the same categorical doubt. He seems to have witnessed the result of a miracle, but later thought better of it because even well-attested, strong evidence "carried falsehood upon the very face of it, and that a miracle, supported by human testimony, was more properly a subject of derision than of argument" (pp. 123-24).
- At the tomb of the Abbé of Paris alleged miracles were produced and confirmed by "judges of unquestioned integrity and attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age." Hume goes on to build a theoretically strong case for the miracles, but none of this is sufficient or even supportive of belief in them (pp. 124-25).
- Hume offers a hypothetical. Let us imagine that Queen Elizabeth died on January 1, 1600. "All historians" (Hume's words) who specialize in English history agree on her time of death. She was seen by her physicians and courtiers before and after her death. She was interred (buried) a month. But then, lo! "She again appeared, resumed her throne, and governed England for three years." Would Hume believe this testimony of her death and then reappearance? Not in the slightest. (p. 128)

Why is Hume so skeptical? Witnesses for the defense and their testimonies are not good or strong enough, but compared to what? Simple. All miracles violate our firm and unalterable experience that establishes the laws of nature.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as 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. (p. 114)

A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent. (p. 115, note 1, emphasis original)

Thus, no person, even if he has the utmost integrity and honesty, can overturn by his testimony the laws of nature established by firm and unalterable experience.

Hume uses, as it were, a two-sided scale, like the scales of justice on the outside of the Supreme Court building. On one side he places our firm and unalterable experience with the laws of nature; on the other he places the reliable testimony for miracles. The first side is always heavier or wins the contest. This is why he could establish the witnesses and testimonies (in the bulleted lists) with such confidence, proclaiming their veracity. But firm and unalterable experience establishing the laws of nature must by the very nature of the case always outweigh the testimonial evidence for miracles. "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence" (p. 110).

[And it is a general maxim (principle) worthy of our attention] that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish". . . (pp. 115-16)

But what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses [to the miracles at the tomb of the Abbé of Paris], but the *absolute* impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as sufficient refutation. (p. 125, emphasis added)

Upon the whole, then, it appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less a proof. (p. 127)

And therefore we may establish it as a maxim [principle] that no human testimony can have such a force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion. (p. 127)

As for the hypothetical death and reappearance of Queen Elizabeth in 1600 (she actually died in 1603), Hume would still not believe the testimonies, despite the events being observed by learned and trusted men who testify to her death and burial for one month:

All this might astonish me; but I would still reply that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature. (p. 128)

Apparently, the (hypothetical) learned and wise historians, physicians and courtiers, who witnessed everything with their own eyes (Elizabeth's death, burial, and reappearance), turn into fools and knaves, according to Hume. What a "miraculous" reversal for such reliable and impeccable witnesses. Apparently, their shocking, quick-change falsehood is not "more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."

Thus, miracles are locked up in Hume's prison, though they are innocent. Under his ironclad presuppositions, they cannot get out even on parole for good behavior. This is unjust.

See Craig, pp. 130-32, for the idea of the scale that Hume seems to have in mind.

No way out?

However, Hume's stacked deck against miracles begs the question or goes in circles. This fallacy means that the answer to a question is found in the premises or in the front end of the investigation. We assume the answer before we inquire into it. His super-high definition of a miracle does this (it violates the laws of nature established by firm and unalterable experience). He is trying to determine whether miracles can occur, but he slams shut the prison doors on them before they can make their appeal, not to mention while they were on trial.

The words *firm* and especially *unalterable* are the crux of the fallacy. How do we know that miracles cannot occur? Because they "violate" or "transgress" the laws of nature that are established by firm and unalterable experience. But why cannot our experience with the laws of nature be "violated" on occasion? Because that would be a miracle. And they don't happen because of our firm and unalterable experience establishes the laws of nature.

Next, Hume's definition of a miracle is so stringent that no historical or empirical investigation will possibly argue the case for miracles. To repeat the circular argument, why are no multiple honest and reliable testimonies in favor of miracles acceptable? Because the laws of nature are firmly and unalterably established by experience. The testimonies are *ipso facto* less accurate and less probable, no matter what. Therefore, no testimonies whatsoever for the defense will open the prison doors, because they are permanently locked in advance, no key existing to open them.

C. S. Lewis describes the circularity:

Now we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely "uniform experience" against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have.

Unfortunately we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can 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. (pp. 132-33)

However, miracles are matters of perception and therefore investigable. They exist, if they do, in the realm of matters of fact. To laugh out of court all exonerating testimonies, regardless of how strong and reliable they are, is prejudicial. Miracles do not get a fair hearing; they never did get a fair trial. They got a bum rap in Hume's court, and now in his prison.

The circular reasoning keeps going round and round, in favor of skeptics.

Minimum security prison?

It is possible that scholars would suggest that I am not being fair to Hume here. It is not clear that he is begging the question. If he simply claims that since the evidence for the laws of nature is always greater than the evidence for a miracle, and since the two bodies of evidence inevitably conflict, then we are

never justified in accepting reports of miracles.

Norman L. Geisler refers to Hume's "softer" argument that focuses on the (un)believability of reports about miracles, not their (im)possibility. The evidence for the rare event-or singular event-is weaker than the evidence for the regular event, so the wise person believes in the regular event ("Miracles and the Modern Mind," p. 75). We also cite the argument by Benjamin F. Armstrong to defuse the accusation of unfairness to Hume. To continue our prison motif, miracles are in a minimum security prison, but they still cannot escape.

(1) Hume speaks of "uniform experience" against miracles. Thus, he either still begs the question or he engages in special pleading. Geisler writes:

It begs the question if Hume presumes to know the whole field of experience to be uniform in advance of looking at the evidence for uniformity. For how can one know that all possible experience will confirm naturalism [which says nature is all there is], unless one has access to all possible experiences, including those in the future? (p. 76).

Then Geisler explains how Hume engages in special pleading, which is a fallacy that ignores unfavorable evidence. But Geisler counters: "If, on the other hand, Hume simply means by 'uniform' experience the select experiences of *some* persons . . . then this is special pleading. For there are others who claim to have experienced miracles" (p. 76).

In addition, after explaining modern Humeans and then quoting Hume himself ("No means of detection remain save those which must be drawn from the very testimony itself of the reporters"), Armstrong says:

Hume's argument, then, appears to be either question-begging or superfluous. If the laws of nature are needed to rule out (past) miracle reports, then these laws may not be used, for nothing will have rendered the reports "non-data" with respect to the laws. If the laws may be used to rule out the reported events, then it will only be because something else has already ruled out these events. The verdict against Flew [a modern Humean who seeks to strengthen Hume's arguments] (and others) is that it is question-begging. ("Hume on Miracles," p. 327)

Armstrong continues:

...The fact that we/some use various nomologicals [law-like generalizations often of nature], whether drawn from science, conventional wisdom, or elsewhere, does not preclude an investigation of these nomologicals. Such an investigation of the nomologicals that Hume would wield against resurrections in no way challenges our ordinary practices. Rather such an investigation may simply show us the limits of what can be provided by our ordinary practices. The limits on our practices may be such that there simply is no particular stock of nomologicals that has epistemic primacy to rule out

resurrections in the way attempted by the Humean argument. (p. 327)

In short, Armstrong says in these two excerpts that to investigate reliable reports on miracles fairly, which (allegedly) take place in the realm of perceptions, no one can escape the charge of begging the question, if one uses the laws to preclude those reliably reported miracles. After our investigation, it may be the case that "there is no particular stock of nomologicals" that completely enjoy "epistemic primacy" to rule out miracles or resurrections, to use Armstrong's example. (Epistemic pertains to knowledge or knowing.)

Armstrong is right, for the key is to investigate and then to formulate laws accordingly. Can we say absolutely that a miracle cannot happen? Sometimes reports, especially in the Age of Science, confirmed by CT scans and even videos, may be so reliable that to shut them out leads to prejudice and obscurantism. How much evidence would it take if a CT scan and the oncologist's own eyes detected cancer, but immediately after prayer the cancer vanished? It is absurd to rule something out that actually happened, no matter how rare.

(2) Geisler says that Hume adds up the evidence against miracles, instead of weighing it in favor of them. But Geisler disagrees: "Rational beliefs should not, however, be determined by majority vote. Hume seems to commit a kind of *consensus gentium* fallacy, an informal fallacy arguing that something should be believed to be true simply because it is believed by most people." (p. 79). Further, sometimes the exceedingly rare event happens. For example, a perfect bridge hand has been dealt, though the odds against it are 1,635,013,559,600 to 1.

Sometimes the "odds" against an event are high (based on past observation), but the evidence for the event is otherwise very good (based on current observation or reliable testimony). Hume's argument confuses *quantity* of evidence with the *quality* of evidence. Evidence must be *weighed*, not *added*. (p. 79, emphasis original)

(3) Hume proves too much. If a miracle really happens, then should we disbelieve it, regardless of whether the evidence is overwhelming? Geisler explains:

For [Hume's] argument does not hold that miracles have not occurred but only that we should not believe they have occurred simply because the evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare. But on this logic, if a miracle did occur-rare as it may be-one should still not believe it. It is patently absurd, however, to claim that an event should be disbelieved, even if it has occurred, that is, when the evidence is overwhelming that the purported miracle has occurred. (p. 80)

Geisler is right, as noted in our analysis of Armstrong's argument (see the first point in this section). The key is to investigate them without prejudice, in case the evidence shows overwhelmingly that an extremely rare event has indeed happened. Geisler goes on to relate two more arguments against Hume's softer version (or minimum security prison), which seemed at first glance to have avoided the fallacy of begging the question, but these three suffice for now. Hume does not avoid that fallacy, and he commits

others.

Believers would not want to relinquish the regularity of the laws of nature. Miracles are much rarer than strictly rare natural events, even though anomalies happen. But skeptics seem to wield, even with their "softer" arguments, the laws against miracles as if the laws are the judge, prosecutor, jury, and executioner. That is unfair. So we reach the same conclusion as noted before and reaffirmed later in this article: miracles may go free after they are investigated and put on trial; their reality must be a live option. If not, then this begs the question always in favor of naturalism.

Five ways out?

Maybe Hume, surprisingly, leaves five small ways out for miracles from their false imprisonment. Maybe this allows him to escape from the accusation of begging the question or circular reasoning. Again, here are his definitions of miracles.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as 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.

A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.

(1) In the first definition, Hume says that our firm and unalterable experience has established the laws of nature. It seems that Hume returns to his theory about the foundation of human knowledge concerning matters of fact (e.g. the sun rises; salt dissolves in water), as opposed to relations of ideas (e.g. proofs in geometry). The foundation of human knowledge about matters of fact is experience with cause and effect, he says (e.g. speaking or talking produces [causes] sound [effect]). And the foundation of this is the accumulation of many experiences with cause and effect. And the foundation of this is mere custom or habit (Hume, pp. 25-47).

If our experience is built on such a weak foundation as custom or habit, can our experience rule out miracles altogether? Granted, miracles may be rare, but impossible? How can any court claim in advance that they are impossible when the court is investigating whether they may occur? Therefore, to investigate miracles, their reality must be a live option and a real possibility, not a fake one. However, it seems that Hume wants things both ways. Our knowledge about matters of fact is (a little) unstable. But when it comes to miracles, which are in this same empirical realm, our experience militates against them because it is unalterable. A little unstable or unalterable. Which is it? There seems at the very least to be an inconsistency. Geisler agrees that Hume is not being consistent with his own epistemology (how we acquire and define knowledge).

[Hume] himself recognized the fallacy of this kind of reasoning [that the past always determines or even resembles the future] when he argued that based on past conformity, nothing can be known with certainty about the future. We cannot even know for sure that the sun will rise tomorrow morning. Hence, for Hume to deny future miracles based on

past experience is inconsistent with his own principles . . . (p. 80)

If this analysis is true, then it leaves the prison doors open to miracles.

Also see Robert A. Larmer, *Water into Wine?* pp. 36-37.

(2) In the second definition Hume assumes the existence of God. If he works a miracle, then the terms "violation" or "transgression" of the laws of nature are wrong. By analogy, if the prison warden allows a concert in chapel, then he commits no violation or transgression of the rules because he permits it within the limits of his own authority. But if a lone guard does this for his own purposes and without permission, then this would be a violation or transgression because he does not act as a rightful authority. The existence of God lifts the analogy beyond the human level. More than a warden, God does not violate or transgress anything of his creation when miracles occur, because he is the final authority over it.

See Kreeft and Tacelli, pp. 111-12, who use the metaphor of a high school principal and a gym teacher.

Lewis writes wisely about how nature naturalizes the immigrant or miracle, so it is not a violator, but a welcome guest. The regularity of nature says, if A (cause), then B (effect). But a miracle introduces a new cause and effect: if A2, then B2, and the new situation conforms to all the laws.

It is therefore a mistake to define a miracle as something that breaks the laws of nature. It doesn't . . . If God annihilates or creates or deflects a unit of matter, He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately Nature domiciles this new situation, makes it at home in her realm, adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws. If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born . . . The moment [the newcomer, e. g. miracle] enters [Nature's] realm, it obeys her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. The divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform, but of feeding new events into that pattern. It does not violate the law's proviso, "If A, then B": it says, "But this time instead of A, A2" and Nature, speaking through all her laws, replies, "Then B2" and naturalizes the immigrant . . . (pp. 80-81)

(3) Hume says that no miracle can be proved as it relates to the foundation of a religion (again begging the question, though we let that pass). But other miracles found in less important contexts may be possible.

For I own that otherwise [from the foundation of a religion] there may be the possibility of miracles, or violations of the normal course of nature, of such a kind to admit of proof from human testimony; though perhaps it will be impossible to find any such in all the

records of history. (Hume, p. 127)

Despite Hume's concession, he still believes that he has a watertight case against even non-foundational miracles because they are mentioned only in recorded history. And such history is unconvincing, for the more remote it is, the less reliable it is (p. 109). Incidentally, this means that the Christian religion, founded by the miracles of Jesus, notably his Resurrection, have no reasonable foundation (p. 130-31). Finally, Hume already stated that miracles did not happen in his modern times and enlightened society (pp. 119-20). It seems, then, that he has once again shut the prison doors on non-foundational miracles, so his concession is empty. Nonetheless, we should take what we can get from Hume and his super-high, cannot-lose definition of miracles, so maybe the prison doors are left a little ajar. This is all the more true if we move forward from an investigation into past history and towards miracles today.

(4) Hume says that probability, not a full proof, may be a criterion for determining the veracity of witnesses for non-foundational miracles (p. 127). Maybe this probability (or perhaps strong possibility) is all that an open-minded person needs in order to move in the direction of belief.

(5) Hume may allow another way out of his prison. He says that "if a person claiming divine authority should command a sick person to be well . . . which immediately follow upon his command, [this] might justly be esteemed [a miracle]" (p. 115, note 1). He also lists other miraculous events, but they do not concern us here because in the linked article *Do Miracles Happen Today?* (see below), we limit the testimonies to recovery from physical ailments. Has anyone recovered immediately after words of prayer or even commands of healing have been spoken?

What about today?

What if today miracles happen that have been verified by the science that examines cause and effect in the human body? It is one thing to rely on an ace up your sleeve-no one can find sufficiently reliable historical records, and miracles simply don't happen in the Age of Enlightenment. But what about miracles we can see with our own eyes, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the Age of Science? Technology may render testimonies in defense of miracles probable and exonerative. Unfortunately, Hume lived before these modern times so he could not avail himself to confirmatory, high technology.

Part one in this series on miracles may be read [here](#).

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Page Printed from: http://www.americanthinker.com/2006/12/humes_miracle_prison_how_they.html at January 20, 2007 - 06:49:08 PM EST

American Thinker

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December 25, 2006

Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison (2): Miracles and Historical Testimony

By [James Arlandson](#)

In our Part Two here, we turn our attention towards the historian's task of investigating past events. The same problems confronting the believer in the realm of science emerge in the realm of history. The same basic regularities that happen today also happened in the past, so they preclude miracles. Or the regularity of past and present events makes miracles highly improbable compared to people's testimony.

The goal of this essay is modest. It is to keep Hume's prison doors open, so that professional skeptics do not close them even before investigating them. This essay, repeating and reinforcing the aim throughout, is a follow up to an earlier one: [Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison \(1\)](#).

For our purposes a believer says that miracles happen, a theist is a believer, and a skeptic says that miracles do not and even cannot occur.

Aren't miracles maximally improbable?

Theistic philosopher Francis Beckwith explains what "maximally improbable" means: ". . . [T]here are no events more improbable than miracles, which is to say that miracles are the most improbable events that can be *conceived*" (Beckwith, "History and Miracles," p. 94, emphasis added).

Skeptic J. L. Mackie (d. 1981) says that miracles are indeed maximally improbable:

[The believer] must in effect *concede* to Hume that the antecedent [causally or logically prior] improbability of this event [miracle] is as high as it could be, hence that, apart from the testimony, we have the strongest possible grounds for believing that the alleged event did not occur. This event must, by the miracle advocate's own admission, be contrary to a genuine, not merely supposed, law of nature, and therefore maximally improbable. It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony would have to overcome (p. 25, emphasis original).

In reply, however, theistic philosopher Keith Ward challenges this in three ways.

First, "there is something odd about trying to balance the improbability of a testimony being mistaken against the improbability of some event occurring" (p. 132). Ward explains further:

What has gone wrong here is the idea that we have two independent probabilities to balance against one another. It would not, despite Hume, be reasonable to say that the improbability of my table rising into the air and the improbability of my being mistaken in claiming to see it, just cancel each other out; so that I must remain agnostic, refusing to believe my own eyes because of some probabilistic balancing-act. On the contrary, as long as I pinch myself and look especially carefully, it would be reasonable to accept, without tentativeness, that the improbable has certainly occurred, and that I have certainly seen it. (p. 133)

That is, if we witness an actual miracle with our own eyes, do we have to deny our capacity to be accurate just because of the improbability balancing act? Why should our senses be refused? We may be extra careful in making sure that they are not. Ward adds:

I will reasonably place a greater weight on the trustworthiness of my senses than on any set of customary expectation of how the world may go. And I will reasonably accept the similar testimony of reliable witnesses in good conditions of observation, in default of some plausible explanation of how they could have fallen into error (p. 133)

Second, Mackie frames his argument in a way that believers must also, along with skeptics, assume miracles are maximally improbable. Ward replies:

But that seems quite false to the way miracles are generally portrayed in the Biblical tradition, at least. If someone believes that there exists an omnipotent God, who created the universe for a purpose; then there is an antecedent probability that he will act within the universe to accomplish his purpose. It seems antecedently improbable that God's purpose could be accomplished without any action in the world by him. (p. 134)

Ward is right about this. Once we allow the existence of God, then we thereafter cannot ultimately dictate terms. A believer steps in and says that his God works miracles.

Third and finally, to counter the believer's acceptance of God's existence, a skeptic may assert a closed system, what Ward calls "scientific objectivism"- "the theory that all events in the natural universe are non-purposive, and wholly determined by general physical laws, which form a closed, universally determining system" (p. 136). But in reply, Ward says it is unfalsifiable and hence suspect. It proves too much. He writes:

If the postulate [of scientific objectivism] is accepted, it will make highly improbable the occurrence of any falsifying instances-such as particular purposive occurrences in nature, not determined by laws of regular succession alone. But such falsifying instances may

occur, and must in a sense be looked for, if the explanatory postulate is to be reasonably upheld . . . It will not be enough to say that, since they are maximally improbable on the theory, no testimony to their occurrence will be acceptable. That will be obviously cheating (p. 136)

Thus, a skeptic must keep open the prison doors shutting in miracles because if miracles are completely excluded, then once again this begs the question in favor of naturalism or scientific objectivism.

Beckwith agrees:

But we can know that miracles are maximally improbable only if we already know that miracles could or have never occurred or that they are logically impossible (that is, conceptually impossible, like a "square circle" or a "married bachelor). Opponents of miracles must therefore maintain that miracles are maximally improbable because they already know that miracles could or have never occurred . . . Consequently, opponents of miracles beg the question if they claim that miracles are maximally improbable. ("History and Miracles," p. 94)

Beckwith goes on in the same chapter to warn that we should not be gullible. The laws of nature are regular. But they are not "inviolable," unless we assume in advance that they are not. So the door to them must be left open in the face of sufficient testimony; otherwise, the wise man risks becoming "dogmatic and obscurantist" in relentlessly denying their occurrence (Beckwith, p. 95).

Finally, Ward likewise concludes this about the maximal improbability argument:

What has gone wrong is that, by speaking of a violation of a law of nature as maximally improbable, we ensure that mistaken observation can never be more improbable. If our claim is the more moderate and reasonable one that such violations are contrary to normal expectation, it is no longer always much more unlikely that events should occur, and be correctly observed, which go against the run of expectation. Indeed, it is not particularly improbable that such improbable things should occasionally be observed to happen, unless you have a general theory-such as "scientific objectivism"-which renders them impossible. (p. 138)

How much evidence does it take?

Can a genuinely miraculous event be known on historical evidence? Flew answers in the negative.

The criteria by which we must assess historical testimony, and the general presumptions which alone make it possible for us to construe the detritus [remains] of the past as historical evidence, must rule out any possibility of establishing, upon purely historical grounds, that some genuinely miraculous event has indeed occurred (*God and Philosophy*, p. 150)

However, Larmer replies to Flew's skepticism, which stands on a faulty definition of a miracle:

Flew's argument in support of this conclusion amounts to the following: (1) historical investigation presupposes the truth of the laws of nature; (2) the laws of nature must be defined as exceptionless; and (3) miracles must be defined in terms of inconsistency. This argument is valid, but not sound. Leaving aside discussion of Flew's first two premises, his third premise cannot be defended. Fundamental to the concept of miracle is the idea that nature must be overridden if a miracle is to occur. But Flew is mistaken in thinking that this implies that the laws of nature must be violated. As I have already shown, miracles, considered as objective events caused by God, can conceivably occur in a world which behaves, always and everywhere, completely in accordance with the laws of nature. (*Water into Wine?* p. 100)

Thus, Larmer says that Flew assumes that the laws of nature must be violated if a miracle occurs, but a miracle can take place in accordance with the laws of nature. When God works a miracle, he changes "the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply," but he does not violate his own laws.

What about studying history?

Flew spells out three propositions concerning the historian's philosophy going into his study of history. His philosophy boils down to the uniformity of the past and the present. Flew says:

The basic propositions are: first, that the present relics of the past cannot be interpreted as historical evidence at all, unless we presume that the same fundamental regularities obtained then as still obtain today; second, that in trying as best he may to determine what actually happened the historian must employ as criteria all his present knowledge, or presumed knowledge, of what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible; and third, that, since miracle has to be defined in terms of practical impossibility the application of these criteria inevitably precludes proof against miracle. (*God and Philosophy*, p. 150)

These propositions can be examined more closely on three fronts.

First, it is true that continuity and consistency between the past and present must exist for us to acquire historical knowledge. But as stated, Flew's watertight propositions beg the question, which assumes the answer at the start of the investigation, thus making the investigation hollow and unable to be defeated or falsified. Beckwith explains:

It is one thing to make the uncontroversial claim that historians must assume some continuity of regularities between the present and the past to have historical knowledge. It is quite another thing, however, to claim . . . that we must assume a nonmiraculous worldview in order to have historical knowledge. Such a position calls for the automatic rejection of new data, regardless of how well grounded evidentially, which may support

the historicity of the miraculous and count against the nonmiraculous worldview.
("History and Miracles," p. 97)

Second, if we assume that a report about a miracle is well founded, then it becomes "highly artificial as well as woefully inadequate" to deny consistently and relentlessly any and all reports and evidence about miracles. We do not weigh one probability but many of them, "a convergence of independent probabilities" (Beckwith, p. 95). At the conclusion of Beckwith's chapter "History and Miracles," he writes: "Even if miracle claims need support from more evidence than ordinary claims in order to be held rationally, it can sometimes be the case that one has sufficient evidence to believe that a miracle has occurred" (p. 98). The evidence can mount up.

Third, Flew's propositions assume that miracles do not continue into the present. "Defenders of [Flew's] argument must show that there are no present miracles and not merely to assume there are not" (Beckwith, "History and Miracles," p. 97). This may be stated positively. In the next article in this series ("Do Miracles Happen Today?"), it will be shown that believers today observe and experience miracles; therefore, their testimony says that they indeed occur now. It is special pleading to ignore their testimony that counters the skeptics' ironclad position, without investigating it on a case-by-case.

Does Flew apply his skepticism consistently?

Corduan analyzes a part of Flew's challenge to believers, which I have put in three steps.

First, Flew says that Christians believe in God's love, no matter how much evidence from evil may militate against the belief in his love; they redefine the concept so that God always maintains his reputation. It seems Christians refuse to listen to contrary evidence and to change their mind.

Corduan summarizes Flew's challenge:

Whenever there is a challenge to their belief in God's love, [Christians] simply redefine the concept so as to avoid having to deal with the possibility that maybe the loving God in whom they believe does not exist. ("Miracles," p. 173)

In one of Flew's earlier works, he says that the assertion that God loves us undergoes a "death by a thousand qualifications" or counter-examples of his love ("Theology and Falsification," p. 97). He then asks: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you [believers] a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?" (p. 99).

Corduan goes on to say that the problem of evil is hotly contested. It is possible to maintain a belief in God's love in the face of evil, but Corduan's goal is not to argue that point.

Second, Corduan spots an inconsistency in Flew's challenge to believers about evil and the love of God. This is, the believers' never-lose position is exactly how Flew opposes the reality of miracles: his skepticism can never lose.

According to Flew, it is contrary to the nature of science to make allowances for the supernatural, and historical reports should not be permitted to violate the nature of reality as science circumscribes it for us. According to Flew, that does not mean that science necessarily has the correct explanation for every historical event, but that whatever the ultimate explanation may be for a special event, it cannot be miraculous. (Corduan, p. 174)

Third, how does Flew's skepticism about miracles parallel the believer's (seeming) unquestioning belief in God's love in the face of evil? Corduan answers the question:

Consequently, Flew's claim that no events are miraculous is completely unfalsifiable, and, just as he accuses the Christian in his defense of the love of God, it becomes a meaningless mantra. No evidence could conceivably count against his rejection of any event as miraculous. (Corduan, p. 174)

Thus, we may pose this question to Flew and other neo-Humans, rephrasing the one he asked of believers in the love of God: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of antisupernaturalism?" (Geisler, "Miracles and the Modern Mind," p. 83).

What is your mindset?

It has been repeated throughout this essay that the prison doors locking up miracles must be kept open, if a fair and proper investigation into them is to be done. If the skeptic shuts them before the investigation begins, then this begs the question always in favor of naturalism. This worldview says that nature is all that exists, and it cannot be influenced by causes outside of itself; it is the Only Fact.

Most opposition to the possibility of miracles in the West comes from people controlled by the presuppositions of naturalism. Most such people refuse even to consider evidence that appears to support the actuality of miracles...because-consciously or unconsciously-their minds are closed on that subject. Miracles are judged to be impossible *before the fact*. (Ronald Nash, "Miracles and Conceptual Systems," pp. 130-31, emphasis original)

That is, miracles must be physically possible, not merely logically (conceptually) possible. And to determine whether they in fact occur, an open and fair investigation must be done. We must leave our offices and computers and look for evidence.

So what does all of this mean?

The Conclusion here applies also to [Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison \(1\)](#).

Miracles happen, if they do, in the realm of perceptions, in the empirical realm, in the world of matters of fact. Therefore, they are investigable. However, can sufficient testimony ever outweigh the (nearly) unalterable laws of nature? If the claims of miracle are poised on one side of the scale, and the laws of nature on the other side, which side is heavier? Where should we place our confidence? Yet, it is one thing to dispute over miracles two thousand years ago, but what if miracles happen today under the watchful eye of science?

Further, what if the evidence for a miracle is multifaceted? What if it amounts to a convergence of probabilities (Beckwith, "History and Miracles," p. 95)? For example, a man has a lump under his arm. He and his wife can feel it. A doctor feels it too and concludes that it is likely a tumor. Also, a CT scan says that a tumor is there. A biopsy is done. A tumor is confirmed.

However, a new factor is introduced into human biology or the laws of health. People pray directly to God to remove the tumor. After the prayer, the lump has vanished. A second CT scan shows that it is completely gone. The oncologist did not treat it.

Here we have a convergence of factors that make the evidence of a miracle strong. The lump was visible (sight) to the patient and his wife and others who are untrained in medicine. One could feel it with one's hand (touch). Qualified doctors-modern representatives of science-examined the tumor with their own eyes. They performed a biopsy. A CT scan-modern technology-confirmed it was there. But after prayer, it disappeared. The oncologist is baffled, but gives the (former) cancer patient a clean bill of health. After further check ups, the tumor has not returned, no traces. For most people, the side of the scales tips, if only a little, in favor of a miracle.

The meaning of *skepticism* in ancient Greek is "to look closely" or "to examine." Skeptics have a duty to their name to investigate.

The next part in the series on miracles considers the evidence of real-life miracles today. It is time we supplement the philosophical arguments with empirical evidence, using modern technology to examine and perhaps confirm miracles-though I claim here in advance that, according to the evidence proffered in the next article, miracles in fact occur.

Part one in this series on miracles may be read [here](#).

Part two may be read [here](#).

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January 06, 2007

Miracles and the Laws of Nature

By [James Arlandson](#)

Miracles, if they happen, are exceedingly rare, but compared to what?

When you drive your car, you obey the laws of nature. The engine conforming to mechanical laws propels the rest of the car forward, and this obeys the laws of motion. The law of gravity keeps the car on the road. Examples of the laws of nature could be multiplied. Thus, miracles are exceedingly rare compared to the flow of natural laws that describe our world and even the entire universe. Believers in miracles would not want it any other way.

Though miracles are very rare by definition, are they completely impossible? To investigate them fairly, can they be excluded from the start? Should they be a real possibility, not an artificial one?

It is said that Anthony Flew and others improve on David Hume's arguments against miracles. The improvement is indeed accomplished, but is it absolutely sufficient to produce insurmountable doubt about miracles? Is skepticism firm and unshakable? To continue the prison metaphor begun in the article on Hume, are the prison doors locking up miracles slightly open? Can the doors ever be shut in an honest inquiry into them?

In various writings, Flew divides his analysis into the world of science and of history, so we follow this division too.

In this part, Flew and other skeptics describe the scientist's task of weighing all of the input data. Can a believer claim a miracle and still uphold the laws of nature? How do we recognize a miracle? Can it not be encompassed by nature itself? What kind of evidence is acceptable, if any? For our purposes a believer says that miracles happen, a theist is a believer, and a skeptic says that miracles do not and even cannot occur.

The goal of this essay is modest. It is to keep Hume's prison doors open, so that professional skeptics do not close them even before investigating them. This essay, repeating and reinforcing that aim throughout, is a follow up to an earlier one, [Hume's Miracle Prison](#).

Can a believer be consistent?

Flew outlines the believer's difficulty, perhaps an insoluble one (he says), in maintaining on the one hand an orderly universe, and on the other, exceptions or miracles.

The inevitable tension between the ideas of rule [natural order] and of exception [miracle] thus gives concepts of the miraculous an inherent instability. ("Miracles," p. 347).

But insofar as a miracle involves an alleged overriding of a law of nature, [the believer] too is committed to showing the subsistence of a natural order. Exceptions are logically dependent upon rules. Only insofar as it can be shown that there is an order does it begin to be possible to show that the order is occasionally overridden. The difficulty (perhaps an insoluble one) is to maintain simultaneously both the strong rules and the genuine exceptions to them. (p. 347)

What Flew says here is correct. Nature is orderly, and miracles are rare exceptions to its laws. A believer would not have it any other way. But a believer simply does not rule out *a priori* any miracle; that is, miracles must be a real possibility, not a fake one.

Further, theistic philosopher Stephen T. Davis is right when he observes:

Flew first points out that believers in miracles typically offer historical or probabilistic arguments in favor of the miracles they believe in. But this makes their position inconsistent, for their arguments always presuppose the very regularity of nature and the reliability of nature's laws that they are arguing against. Much of what Flew says here is correct. Believers in miracles do indeed presuppose regular workings of nature in order to argue that certain irregularities (i.e. miracles) occur. But how does this make their position inconsistent? Is it not possible that nature, so to speak, acts regularly and predictably most but not all of the time? If this is possible, then miracle-believers will naturally argue for certain irregularities in nature on the basis of regularities seen elsewhere. ("Miracle at Cana," p. 431)

May skeptics rightly demand prison lockdown?

William P. Alston responds to a well-received essay by Langdon Gilkey who says that the Biblical description of miracles is outmoded in the world of modern science. Though Alston's directs his comments at Gilkey's essay, they are relevant to Flew's (and other skeptics') notions, as well. The universe that we know today is locked tight by cause and effect. For example, gravity will make (cause) a human sink (effect) if he tries to stand upright in deep water. Miracles found in the Bible need to be demythologized or stripped bare of all supernatural elements for modern humanity, say the skeptics. Alston explains the problem posed by such views.

It is often supposed that the laws of nature discovered by modern physical science...make it impossible that God should even partly determine the course of events, at least without violating those laws (if that is at all possible). In making this supposition one supposes that such laws specify *unqualifiedly* causally sufficient conditions. Thus a law of hydrostatics might specify as a sufficient condition for a body sinking in still waters . . . that the body be of a density greater than the water. A man standing upright in

the middle of a deep lake without sinking would be a violation of that law, and so would be impossible. ("How to Think about Divine Action," p. 55, emphasis original)

However, Alston disagrees with the skeptics' position, because these laws are upheld only on the absence of other relevant factors. Can all factors be excluded in a cause-and-effect nexus (connection) in a closed system?

But in fact we are never justified in accepting laws of this sort. The most we are ever justified in accepting is a law that specifies what will be the outcome of certain conditions *in the absence of any relevant factors other than those specified in the law*. The laws we have reason to accept lay down sufficient conditions only within a "closed system," i.e. a system closed to influence other than those specified in the law. None of the laws we are capable of working with take account of all possible influences. (pp. 55-56, emphasis original)

So maybe the system is not completely closed, after all, because can we be assured that no unknown influences are lurking on the horizon? Alston mentions some natural influences on the law of hydrostatics that appear to suspend the law that says a man cannot stand upright in deep water. One example is a man being pulled by a motor boat. Then he concludes:

...It can hardly be claimed that such a law will be violated if a divine outside force intervenes; and hence it can hardly be claimed that such laws imply that God does not intervene, much less imply that this is impossible. (p. 56)

However, perhaps Flew and other skeptics would reply that Alston has overlooked something important. The law of hydrostatics says a man cannot stand upright in deep water, but if he is towed by a motor boat, then the laws of motion come into play, combining with hydrostatics. Both sets of laws cause a man to water ski, even barefooted. This still accords with the laws of nature.

Yet even in this case, the prison doors locking up miracles must be kept open. Otherwise, a skeptic risks begging the question. Recall that this fallacy says that the answer to the question we are investigating is found at the front of the investigation. Francis Beckwith writes:

Sufficient testimony and evidence make it reasonable to believe that an improbable event has actually occurred. Hence to say that no testimony or evidence is sufficient for us to be justified in believing a miracle has occurred is to beg the question in favor of naturalism [which says that nature alone exists and is uniform, regular, and continuous]. In other words, in order to claim that no evidence is sufficient to prove a miraculous event has occurred, opponents of miracles must assume the truth of naturalism, the view which if true would make evidence for a miracle de facto insufficient ("History and Miracles," pp. 93-94)

R. C. Wallace rightly adds:

Necessarily a miracle would not be conformable to what we are already familiar with and so expect. But to exclude it as impossible on those grounds alone would render scientific

theory too static, that is too immune to counter-evidence and subsequent change. (p. 237)

Are miracles physically possible?

To say that something is logically possible means that it is a conceptually consistent state of affairs. It does not have to be physically possible. However, Flew says in his Encyclopedia article and in the context of historical investigation that miracles may be logically possible, but not physically possible. He writes:

But in this context, what is impossible is what is physically, as opposed to logically, impossible. ("Miracles," 351)

See also Everitt's article that argues for the logical impossibility of miracles, not to mention their physical impossibility, and Ahern (1977) concludes the same (click on the bibliography at the end of this article).

However, Flew may adopt this strategy to show that he has an open mind. R. C. Wallace correctly notes:

[Flew] makes use of a distinction between logical and physical impossibility, his aim being to show that he . . . can have an open mind that the Humean position requires as to what conceivably might occur, but yet in practice be able to exclude any anomalies that would be too extreme and disruptive. (p. 232)

To believers, Flew's distinction between logical and physical possibilities seems like unwanted charity. But his (supposed) concession does not allow the skeptic to escape from the fallacy of begging the question. Miracles must be a genuine possibility, not a fake one, if skeptics are to investigate them fairly.

Do miracles destroy the laws of nature?

One may worry that miracles destroy the law of nature, and science topples down with it. However, a miracle does not tear the fabric of the laws of nature. The laws accommodate miracles, once the new, divine factor is introduced. As noted in [Hume's Miracle Prison](#), C. S. Lewis rightly says that a virgin conceiving without a man still goes through the normal feelings of carrying a child and birthing it, and miraculous wine still intoxicates. Further, even if a million miracles occurred around the globe every hour, the laws of nature are too strong and all-encompassing to be scarred beyond recognition or even at all. A man experiencing a miraculous healing will eventually succumb to death in his old age. Nature will have her way.

Do miracles violate the laws of nature?

The short answer is no. Robert A. Larmer explains:

It is important to emphasize that the occurrence of such an event [a miracle] would in no

way imply that the laws of nature had been contravened. We do not, for example, violate the laws of motion if we toss an extra billiard ball into a group of billiard balls in motion on a billiard table. There is no movement at which the laws of motion are contravened. What we do by introducing the extra billiard ball is to change the material conditions to which the laws of motion apply and hence change the result which would otherwise be expected. Similarly by creating or annihilating a unit or units of mass/energy, God may produce in nature an event that could not otherwise occur without violating the laws of nature. (*Water into Wine?* p. 20)

Thus, God changes the material conditions to which the laws apply. He does not violate his own laws. As I noted in [Hume's Miracle Prison](#), if a prison warden allows a concert in chapel, then he commits no violation or transgression of the rules, because he calls for them within the limits of his own authority. But if a lone guard does this for his own purposes and without permission, then this would be a violation or transgression because he does not act as a rightful authority. The existence of God lifts the analogy beyond the human level. More than a warden, God does not violate or transgress anything of his creation when miracles occur, because he is the final authority over it.

Can we recognize miracles?

According to Flew, humans, apparently, have no capacity for recognizing miracles that endorse a religion or possibly any miracle, for the miracles are part of nature's rules. Humans do not have any natural criterion for saying that nature itself could not encompass an alleged miracle. That is, it may be a part of nature that a scientist may not have expected, but it is not beyond the powers of nature.

We simply do not have, and could not have [note the words], any natural (as opposed to revealed) criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden. ("Miracles," p. 349)

It is true that some miracles may be hard to detect. My favorite says that God helped a driver find an ideal parking place. This can be attributed to coincidence. With that acknowledgement given, however, this is largely a strange idea in Flew's Encyclopedia article on miracles. Humans cannot have any natural criteria? His claim seems to be pulled out of thin air. Believers or skeptics can indeed recognize a miracle.

If a woman who was completely blind or a man who has one leg much shorter than the other recovers completely (the first can see and the second can walk normally), then the results would be clear to a child. It is incumbent on the skeptic to overturn this recognition that even a child has. How can a skeptic attribute their recoveries to all-encompassing nature?

Curiously, the burden of proof for an all-powerful nature shifts over to the skeptics. It seems the skeptic falls prey to the anything-but-God explanation, the corollary opposite of the God-of-the-gaps.

Winfried Corduan, writing in favor of theism, says that skeptics like Flew want things both ways. A miracle is somehow natural, but it nonetheless "violates" natural law.

But perhaps Flew also had in mind the idea of a natural "nonmiraculous miracle," an event that cannot be deemed a miracle simply because it happened. The problem with "natural miracles" is that they are an attempt by a naturalistic skeptic to have it both ways. For as Flew stated . . . the scientific enterprise involves not merely description but the subsumption of events under laws . . . But surely this is a two-edged sword that undercuts the idea of "natural miracle" as well. The idea of a natural event that violates the natural order can be maintained only on the basis of dogmatic antisupernaturalism. ("Recognizing a Miracle," p. 110)

In the next paragraph in Corduan's chapter he states his objection more succinctly, citing the fallacy of the appeal to ignorance:

The skeptics' dogmatic position must ultimately degenerate into the fallacy of the appeal to ignorance: no one has proven that an event could not be the result of some unknown scientific law; therefore the event is the result of an unknown scientific law. Such a line of reasoning is not convincing. (p. 110)

Thus, Flew's belief in an all-encompassing nature simply assumes in advance that miracles do not and cannot occur. Somehow they are still natural-if only the scientist could find the (new) natural law that the "nonmiraculous miracle" produces. We believers must not let the skeptics decide on the rules of the game, so to speak. Many miracles, such as deaf ears opening immediately after prayer, are not so difficult to detect.

What if nature's laws and historical testimony conflict?

This last question in Part One here provides a transition to Part Two.

In the following passage, Flew puts the laws of nature over reliable testimony in history. Therefore, any past "miracle" never happened.

The justification for giving the "scientific" . . . ultimate precedence . . . over the "historical" lies in the nature of the propositions concerned and in the evidence which can be deployed to sustain them. It derives-to borrow the expression of Hume's material mode of thought-"from the very nature of the fact." The candidate historical proposition will be particular, often singular, and in the past tense . . . by reason of this very pastness and particularity it is no longer possible to examine the subject directly for himself . . . The "law of nature" will, unlike the candidate historical proposition, be a general nomological

[law-like generalization]. It can thus be tested at any time by any person. (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, pp. 207-08, also quoted in Larmer, *Water into Wine?* p. 101)

Thus, any testimony in the past can never be used to justify a miracle. The law of nature is more probable. An historical proposition is "particular, often singular and in the past tense." But can a historical proposition not be tested over and over again, though Flew says it cannot?

In reply, prominent theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne points out why Flew is wrong. Historical events can be investigated thoroughly, even if they are "particular, often singular, and in the past tense."

Any person can test for the truth of a purported scientific law, but a positive result to one test will give only limited support to the claim. Exactly the same holds true for purported historical truths. Anyone can examine the evidence, but a particular piece of evidence gives only limited support to the claim that the historical proposition is true. But in the historical as in the scientific case, there is no limit to the testing which we can do . . . True, the actual traces, apparent memories and testimony, which I may term direct evidence, available to an inquirer are unlikely to increase in number, at any rate after a certain time . . . But although the number of pieces of direct evidence about what happened may not increase, more and more evidence can be obtained about the reliability of the evidence which we have. One could show the evidence yielded by traces of certain types, or testimony given by witnesses of such-and-such character in such-and-such circumstances was always correct. This indirect evidence could mount up in just the way in which the evidence of the physical impossibility of an event could mount up. (pp. 42-43)

Swinburne says here that evidence for an event (read: miracle) in the past could mount up and be tested. One should not reject or discredit historical testimony out of hand. It must be examined on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes the evidence is strong. Plus, what if miracles do not happen only in the past? What if they can be observed in the present tense, in the now? Would this not open the prison doors to their happening in the past? This would strengthen the evidence, making it difficult to reject.

Summary

Flew and other skeptics seem to dismiss out of court any evidence for miracles. But this point bears repeating: miracles actually happening must be a real possibility, not a fake one; they must be investigated fairly and open-mindedly because the evidence for them may be stronger than we may expect. The prison doors keeping miracles locked up must be kept open, if skeptics are to avoid the fallacy of begging the question.

Part One: [Miracles and New Testament Studies](#)

Part Two: [Hume's Miracle Prison: How They Got Out Alive](#)

Part Three: [Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison \(2\): Miracles and Historical Testimony](#)

American Thinker

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January 13, 2007

Do Miracles Happen Today?

By [James Arlandson](#)

Has anyone recovered immediately after words of prayer or even commands of healing have been spoken? It is time to investigate this and apply the results to philosophical and theological arguments. That is the goal of this article.

The last three articles in this series, on Hume's miracle prison and its fortification, have the goal of keeping the prison door to miracles open. If one keeps the door closed so that miracles are not a genuine option or real possibility, then this begs the question always in favor of the closed system of naturalism. This is unfair and prejudicial. The allegedly closed natural system of cause and effect (e.g. talking causes sound) that we live in offers no guarantees from divine action.

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), agrees, apparently. He says in his essay on miracles (Section X) in his book *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, that "if a person claiming divine authority should command a sick person to be well . . . which immediately follow upon his command, [this] might justly be esteemed [a miracle]" (p. 115, note 1). This leaves the prison door to miracles open.

So let's search for hard evidence of miracles today.

Historical context

The historical context of the reports of miracles is important. The Pentecostal Movement began in various regions around the globe, such as America, Germany, and Australia, in the early twentieth century. The Charismatic Renewal began in the last third of the same century. (The healing movement in the 1940s and 1950s is omitted in this brief survey.) Both the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, even today, benefit and learn from each other; indeed, the Charismatic Renewal grew, in part, out of Pentecostalism and expanded beyond the earlier movement's church borders. Influenced thus, many churches small or large around the globe have sprung up rapidly. They provide a spiritual environment for miracles to happen.

Testimonies of miracles today

This passage, representing other summaries, encapsulates in a few words the healing ministry of Jesus in Israel, several decades prior to the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70:

30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. 31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. (Matt. 15:30-31)

That passage assumes that the power of God (Luke 6:19) is real and heals the infirm. "And they praised the God of Israel."

A small, representative sample of miracles today follows:

1. Robert A. Larmer, professor of philosophy at University of New Brunswick, offers this testimony: . . . "For example, my minister [of a charismatic church], whom I know to be of good character and judgment, tells me that his father experienced an overnight recovery from the last stages of cancer that has been diagnosed as terminal by a number of doctors, and . . . his report is confirmed by a large number of people acquainted with his father" . . . ("Miracles and Testimony," p. 130)
2. A woman in my own church tells a similar story. The CT scan showed that she had cancer, but in the early stages. After prayer, the next CT scan showed the cancer disappeared. A misdiagnosis? The oncologist would disagree.
3. The senior pastor of my church was a businessman before he went into ministry. One of his employees injured her leg. He asked permission to pray for it, and she allowed him. Immediately, she could walk normally. This was done in private without cameras or a charged up atmosphere, though an exciting atmosphere of a large conference on healing is perfectly legitimate.
4. An associate pastor of my church tells a similar story. As he was going out of a restaurant, a man walking with crutches was coming into the restaurant. The pastor, though not knowing the man, asked permission to pray for him, and the injured man, somewhat surprised, allowed it. After praying for him and exchanging pleasantries, the pastor left, walking toward his car. As he was driving away, he noticed the man outside the restaurant, carrying his crutches, waving them triumphantly and indicating that he no longer needed them. Evidently, the man was healed. This happened without cameras or a charged up atmosphere, though an exciting atmosphere of a large conference on healing is legitimate.

The following miracles are found in D. C. Lewis's book *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact?* Lewis has a PhD in Social Anthropology. He is a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He conducted research on the Harrogate Conference (England) in the autumn of 1986, led by John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Churches. Some 2,470 people attended, and 1,890 returned a questionnaire. One hundred were chosen at random, and they were followed up for a period of six months to over a year. The scientific method in the social sciences was carefully followed throughout Lewis' investigation (pp. 15-16; and see Appendix A).

1. In investigating the claimed healings during the follow-ups, someone (an "informant") reports after receiving prayer: "My left hip was alright for some months, when I felt pain coming

again . . . So I asked some brothers to pray for me for a second time. Since then I do not feel any more pain in my left hip" (p. 25).

2. In another follow-up, an "informant" wrote regarding his or her total healing of a hernia after prayer: "I have never had any trouble with the hernia whatsoever" (p. 25).
3. One man wrote on the questionnaire about his twisted ankle. "After prayer, the pain was gone! I tried to make it come back by twisting to what would have been uncomfortable but it was OK . . . Talk about stunned." Fifteen months later he wrote: "I've had no problems with the ankle since the healing. I've tested this out with various sports like squash, badminton and some running without any reaction" (p. 26).
4. A nurse reports that "the physical healing I received for my old prolapsed disc injury was complete for about seven months. I was totally pain free and unrestricted in movement and/or exercise and stress related activities." However, she reinjured it after an overweight patient shifted her weight onto the nurse when she was lifting the patient (p. 26).
5. It is difficult to measure a leg lengthening when it grows out by a half an inch, even if God works a miracle. It could be attributed to natural processes. However, this report says that someone's leg was lengthened by an inch-and-a-half, during the process of prayer. "We prayed for my leg: I watched the leg come level with my right leg and even heard it grow-like breaking wood. I could not walk right for twenty years . . . I didn't wear a built-up shoe, just limped . . . They prayed for my hip to come back to the position it should be-I feel it has. For the first time in twenty-one years I can walk without discomfort or pain, it seems level to me" (p. 38).
6. A woman complained of extra-sensitive teeth. Cold air or hot tea caused a lot of pain. Her written report on her healing is lengthy, but in the end, her dentist wrote on August 18, 1987: "Routine dental check up. Patient no longer complains of sensitive teeth" (p. 40).
7. In a case outside of the Wimber conference, Lewis reports total blindness being healed. An article in the November / December 1988 issue of *Prophecy Today* says that "twenty-three-year old Christine Newton from Durham who was born blind but after receiving prayer for healing 'felt her eyeballs grow and when she opened her eyes she could see-for the first time in her life! . . . At first her sight was dim, but it has become gradually clearer each day. Now she is learning to read and write'" (p. 288, Appendix C).
8. In an earlier conference at Sheffield, England, led by John Wimber, a man was healed of acute insomnia and his wife was healed of deafness. These cases lie outside of Lewis' study of the Harrogate conference, so he includes them in Appendix C. He writes: "However, because they were written at least a year after the events described they do provide some further evidence of the persistence of physical healings . . . it seems difficult to attribute the healings to known medical processes" (p. 289). The patient reports on his prayer session with two American youths, who irritated him with their casual attitude and gum chewing. He slept well that night, but attributed it to a "real tiredness." Then he reports:

...The next day my wife was prayed for, for deafness. She was instantly healed! That night, having gone to bed, she awoke me at approximately 1:30 a.m. I was rather irritated, as from past experience the chances of returning to sleep for me were rather slim. "What's wrong with you?" I asked. She said that she couldn't sleep because she could hear the alarm clock ticking!! She then reminded me I was healed. I resumed sleep, and have had only one night in the past year when I have not slept well. PS: My wife still

has problems with hearing too much at night! (pp. 289-90, Appendix C)

A proper perspective

It should be pointed out that these reports in Lewis' book indicate total healing. The fuller investigation shows, however, that sometimes healings did not occur even though prayers were offered. In other cases the patients showed a little or some improvement. (Why these variations happen is another article entirely.) Also, the last eight miracles were investigated and written up in the mid-1980s. But I have heard countless testimonies of miracles from nameless, reliable witnesses who want no public attention or fame or fortune. They report that the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and cancer vanishes-the list could go on. Indeed, I have witnessed such miracles with my own eyes.

Next, those miracles are not only about an inner personal experience that no one can verify empirically and that everyone can claim. Rather, they can be followed up and examined.

Further, it is true that public charlatans and quacks manipulate people and claim miracles where none occur. But it is equally true that genuine miracles happen, though they are often behind the scenes. It would be prejudicial to dismiss all miracles because of some forgeries, as Hume does in his countless examples of fakes and frauds to indict all miracles. This repeats the Pyrrhonist fallacy that says that because some accounts of miracles can be dismissed, all accounts can be dismissed (Larmer, *Water into Wine?* p. 122).

What about psychosomatic healings? Sometimes this is true. A patient feels bitter about an unpleasant experience from years ago, and he holds a grudge that eats away at him. Lewis records one or two of such healings. However, the miracles in the list above have nothing to do with psychosomatic illness and healing. A leg really did grow out, but not because of some released bitterness. Extra-sensitive teeth really did stop hurting, without a psychological healing coming before the physical healing.

Finally, those miracles listed above are found in a moral and religious context. This means that they cannot be disregarded out of hand as obscure, bizarre anomalies. This is the problem with Hume's hypothetical account of Queen Elizabeth's revivification. It has no religious context, and nor was the miracle done by a devout, holy, and great moral person. It was a fluke. This is different from the miracles done by Jesus. The context is important in interpreting miracles as opposed to strange, random occurrences (Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 147).

An atmosphere of faith

It is prejudicial to disbelieve in miracles because they occur in an atmosphere of belief. For example, Hume says that when the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of miracles, therefore, people of religion naturally or have a propensity to believe such things (p. 117). Next, "a religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality" (p. 117). Or an eloquent speaker may manipulate the masses (p. 118).

In reply, however, skeptics do not get the privilege of setting the rules of the game. Miracles happen wherever faith and God's presence are found. If people come together in a conference, expecting God to

"show up," so to speak, then so be it. Plus, Pastor Wimber avoided hype and hoopla. He never shouted and shrieked, whipping people up into a frenzied or ecstatic state of "enthusiasm" (a favorite derisory word of Enlightenment thinkers like Hume and Voltaire). Wimber's ministry was known for its "laid-back California" style.

Also, many miracles, such as the first four listed above, occur behind the scenes, without the cameras running or appeals for money thundering out from the "faith healer." Ordinary people pray and see miracles with their own eyes. Such unsung heroes of the faith derive no material benefit.

Miracles and "primitive" people

Hume says that (alleged) miracles are prone to happen among primitive and "barbarous" people (pp. 119-21). In one sense he is right, yet in another he is wrong.

He is right because the so-called primitive people have not been educated in western philosophy, so they may have more faith than the average Westerner, to the credit of the "primitives." Yet, these miracles listed above happened in the West, in Hume's own neighborhood, England (he was Scottish) during the age of science and technology, which Hume could only dream about. This is another reason why the miracles listed above were selected. They happen wherever people have childlike faith, whether in the first world or developing world.

However, Hume was wrong to express such regional centrism, but we should not fault him too much for this because he lived in the wrong century. The worldwide web and satellite has shrunk the world down to nearly nothing. A miracle can be filmed, uploaded to a satellite, beamed across the globe, and transmitted to our television in a few seconds. Or a film clip of it can fly around the web. The concept "primitive," though not vanishing completely yet, is becoming obsolete, particularly the concept of "barbarity," as social scientists may have used it in the past.

See James Rutz' book [Megashift](#) that tracks down miracles around the globe. He has URLs or web links to reports and photos of some of them. He has some accounts of resurrections. One Nigerian holds up his death certificate signed by a medical doctor (pp. 9-12). Go to megashift.org for online reports. But I cannot vouch for the scientific method on the site or in the book. He seems, rather, to report miracles and sometimes double-check the sources of the reports.

Recognizing miracles

Anthony Flew, who has strengthened Hume's skepticism about miracles, writes:

We simply do not have, and could not have [note the words], any natural (as opposed to revealed) criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden.

("Miracles," p. 349)

It is true that some miracles may be hard to detect. My favorite says God helped a driver find an ideal parking place. But this can be attributed to coincidence. With that acknowledgement given, however, Flew's claim about the unrecognizability of miracles is largely a strange idea in his Encyclopedia article. Humans cannot have any natural criteria to recognize miracles? His assertion seems to be pulled out of thin air, or maybe he is thinking of stories about the Bermuda triangle or images of Jesus appearing in deep-fried tortillas. But believers or skeptics can indeed recognize some miracles.

If a woman who was completely blind from birth or a man who has one leg much shorter than the other recovers completely (the first can see and the second can walk normally), then the results would be clear to a child. It is incumbent on the skeptic to overturn this recognition that even a child has. How can a skeptic attribute their recoveries to all-encompassing nature?

One miracle not listed here occurred in Russia, after prayer from an American. A little girl was paralyzed in her arms shortly after her birth. After prayer, she recovered the use of her arms. A doctor who knew of her two distinct conditions before and after prayer confirmed all of this. Photos were taken of her chasing and blowing out soap bubbles, waving her arms excitedly (Rutz, p. 23).

Curiously, the burden of proof for an all-powerful nature now shifts over to the skeptics. It seems they fall prey to the anything-but-God explanation, the corollary opposite of the God- of-the-gaps, which invokes a miracle whenever a difficult or unsolvable problem comes up. For my part, however, I believe the little girl.

Repeated study of miracles

Flew writes the following about a long-past historical event (read: an alleged miracle of the Bible), contrasting it with the laws of nature that operate consistently regardless of the period of time:

The candidate historical proposition will be particular, often singular, and in the past tense . . . by reason of this very pastness and particularity it is no longer possible to examine the subject directly for himself . . . The "law of nature" will, unlike the candidate historical proposition, be a general nomological [law-like generalization]. It can thus be tested at any time by any person. (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, pp. 207-08)

In reply, however, miracles *today* can be studied over and over again. A scientific observer like D. C. Lewis can watch a prayer being offered for blind eyes. He can watch the blind eyes see after prayer. The patient can get a check up with an ophthalmologist who knows that the patient was blind. The observer can verify the results.

A scientific observer may not need to investigate one patient again and again, after the evidence is complete, but theoretically he can do this. Indeed, Lewis sometimes waited for over a year before he investigated, even though he attended the conference at Harrogate. This places the miracles in the past, and they are investigable over an extended period and repeatedly. Such past miracles may have as much or more evidence than the evidence for a past natural event recorded in the history books.

Also, if an observer is satisfied that the evidence for a miracle is strong and complete, then he can investigate another miracle today, such as a total healing of deafness. He can repeat the scientific process for as many miracles as may happen.

Do miracles violate the laws of nature?

The answer is no. As I noted in the article [Hume's Miracle Prison](#), if a warden allows a concert in chapel, then he commits no violation or transgression of the rules. He calls for them within the limits of his own authority. But if a lone guard does this for his own purposes and without permission, then this would be a violation or transgression because he does not act as a rightful authority.

The existence of God lifts the analogy beyond the human level. More than a warden, God does not violate or transgress anything of his creation when miracles occur, because he is the final authority over it. God inserts a new factor (miracle) and then nature accommodates it. As C. S. Lewis says (see the previous link), miraculous wine still intoxicates, miraculous bread is still digested and nourishing, and a miraculous conception still has to go through nine months of pregnancy and then a painful birth. Normal, natural processes say, "If A, then B." A miracle says, "If A2, then B2."

See Kreeft and Tacelli, pp. 111-12, who use the example of a high school principal and a gym teacher.

Definition of miracles

Theologically, a miracle may be defined as God's (or his agent's) intervention, introduction, or insertion of a new condition or factor that would otherwise be impossible naturally. As noted, such miracles take place in a religious context, so they are not bizarre anomalies. Such miracles often take place after prayer—even a one-word prayer of "help!" Miracles of healing, for example, eliminate abnormalities attacking human health. Some theologians have called the abnormalities parasites attached to the good (health). These destructive conditions describe evil perfectly. However, healing miracles purge out or destroy or correct debilitating conditions, such as shrinking tumors to nothing, repairing bent and dislocated bones, and restoring sight and hearing, to cite only these examples.

It is true that modern medical treatments like chemo therapy can destroy cancer cells, for example (and there is nothing wrong with seeking medical attention), but miracles of divine healing take on a new dimension of God's intervention coinciding with prayer, as we have seen in the examples listed above. As Dr. Lewis rightly concludes from his observations, many miracles he witnessed and researched cannot be attributed to natural processes alone or at all.

Theologically speaking, a miracle is not a violation or transgression of the laws of nature, even if it destroys a metastasized tumor or cancer cells, which are abnormalities in human health. It does not violate or transgress God's laws even if Jesus turns water into wine or walks on water. Instead, it inserts new material conditions to which the laws of nature apply (See Larmer, *Water into Wine?* pp. 3-30, though he may not agree entirely with my own conclusions).

More importantly, the words "violation" and "transgression" have a negative, even criminal connotation.

Therefore, nor is a miracle an intrusion or in-breaking in the sense of capriciousness or burglary even, but in the positive sense of rescuing. God as hero saves us, perhaps at the last minute. He is not capricious, for his character is good, and he acts with purpose, even if we do not or cannot come to know it; we have a limited epistemic point of view. Nonetheless, he is free to walk onto his own property (the universe), so to speak, without violating or transgressing any of his own laws-the very laws he created. Therefore, contrary to the conclusions of some Enlightenment thinkers, God's actions in the world are positive and redemptive. They show his love for people without violating or transgressing any of his own laws, as if he were a home invader or a rapist of Mother Nature.

Maybe the question over terms concerns the point of view of the investigator. From a non-theistic point of view, specifically one that holds that nature is all that exists, the Only Fact, "violation" seems an apt description of a miracle. However, the whole concept of miracle is framed wrongly from the outset with those images and words denoting criminality-from a theistic point of view. In fact, Christians who understand the Bible believe that the universe will not last forever because God will exercise his right even to destroy part of his creation and make another one or to renew parts of the first (Matt. 24:35; Heb. 12:27; 2 Pet. 3:10). So if he destroys cells that are abnormal to human health, then this action is minor, when contrasted with his rights over his entire creation in the Last Days. God owns it, so he gives himself permission to renovate it, to improve-redeem-it. Thankfully, he gives himself permission to renew the human body at times by eliminating abnormalities, such as diseases, and by restoring normality to such impairments as dislocated bones, dysfunctional limbs, and non-functioning eyes and ears-all working normally after miracles are effectuated. But the laws of nature will have their way, as he ordains them. Even a person completely healed of cancer will die eventually.

In any case, we need the right point of view, as much as this is possible. And one that introduces God (as traditional theism understands him) into the discussion can offer no guarantee that he will not act according to his own rules and decrees, out of his good character, even if we do not fully have the mental capacity to understand *every* aspect of his actions and purposes and character.

Philosophical significance of miracles

(1) Miracles taking place today may tip the scales of probability slightly towards miracles in philosophical arguments. The miracles listed above-only representative-work together toward a convergence of probabilities or at least possibilities. That is, these miracles can add up and converge to make the possibility or probability of the reality of miracles strong.

Surely they make even a hardened skeptic pause to reflect. What if it's all true?

(2) Miracles happening today do not upset science or the regular laws of nature. In fact, increasing miracles exponentially would do nothing to tear the fabric of nature. There are still far too few miracles, and would that they increase! Even under those happy conditions, science would still sit securely. C. S. Lewis rightly says that theology offers a working arrangement between science and a Christian's prayers.

The philosophy that forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be general, to be *almost* absolute. The Being who threatens Nature's

claim to omnipotence confirms her in her lawful occasions . . . Try to make nature absolute and you find that her uniformity is not even probable. By claiming too much you get nothing. You get the deadlock, as in Hume. Theology offers you a working arrangement, which leaves the scientist free to continue his experiments and the Christian to continue his prayers. (p. 140)

(3) Rather than eliminate the possibility of miracles, one must keep an open mind. In *The Concept of Miracle* (p. 71), prominent theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne describes two starting points before anyone investigates the reports of miracles.

The first starting point is open and receptive.

It should now be apparent that the evidence for or against the occurrence of some particular miracle is extremely widespread. With one [worldview] one rightly does not ask much in the way of detailed historical evidence for a miracle since miracles are the kind of events which one expects to occur in many or certain specific circumstances. The testimony of one witness . . . should be sufficient

The second starting point is skeptical.

With another [worldview] one rightly asks for a large amount of historical evidence, because one's general conviction that the world is a certain sort of world, a world without a god and so a world in which miracles do not happen.

What is your, the reader's, starting point?

(4) It is incumbent on all skeptics to investigate. (The meaning of *skepticism* in original Greek is "to look closely" or "to examine"). Now technology provides a means to firm up the results of the investigation. X-rays reveal abnormalities, and CT scans show cancer, and they can confirm a miraculous healings, as a direct result of prayer. Representatives of science, medical doctors, for example, can be interviewed. A skeptic may follow up on a miracle to find out if the patient was suffering from temporary hysteria, and was not healed after all. I have seen reports on these "temporary miracles," but I have also seen reports that confirm that a miracle was genuine. Next, if completely blind eyes recovering sight, for example, can be filmed and verified that there was no "trick photography" or computer generated images, then why would anyone reject such reliable testimony, unless he started off willfully blind? Maybe the skeptic himself would like to attend religious gatherings or church services to investigate. With the leader's permission, maybe he can film a miracle. This would go a long way to eliminate any suspicion. Thus, technology as witness-honestly used-provides a powerful counter to question-begging rejection of *all* testimonies.

D. C. Lewis investigated fairly and scientifically. He concludes that miracles happened at the Harrogate conference. Skeptics too have a duty to their name to investigate.

Theological significance of miracles

(1) Miracles today do not alter the foundation of Christianity, as if they carry as much weight and authority as Christ's miracles, especially the Resurrection. Each miracle must be put in its proper

context, and Christ is the indispensable founder of Christianity. Indeed, it is he who works the miracles today, not a human "faith healer."

(2) Phillip Wiebe, who teaches in the philosophy department at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, argues that Biblical authors who are accurate about external matters that can be independently verified, such as the chronology or jurisdiction of Roman rulers, are not necessarily accurate about miracles. However, he says, rightly, that miracles happening today like the ones in the Bible would support the accounts of Biblical miracles.

I suggest that the apologetic [defense of a faith] that is needed would show that at least some kind of events alleged in the biblical documents are still found today . . . If events similar to those reported in the miracle stories in the Bible were to be found at the present time, the credibility of those ancient documents would be enhanced. (pp. 116-17)

Though writing from an opposing viewpoint about the Bible, Wiebe is right about this one point. Miracles today like the ones recorded in the Bible can only confirm the Bible. For example, a miracle recovery of sight today supports the Biblical record of similar miracles about healing the blind. In turn, this supports such highly significant and unique miracles as the Virgin Birth and Christ's Resurrection. Miracles today certainly do not disconfirm Bible miracles.

(3) Replying to Wiebe's opposition, Larmer agrees, up to a point. Bible-like miracles today indeed confirm the reports in the Bible. However, the case for them can be made through unvarnished reasoning without them. Larmer correctly says:

The occurrence of similar events [as those recorded in the Bible] in contemporary times is no more necessary for grounding a rational belief in the events recorded in the Bible than a second crossing of the Alps by a Carthaginian army is necessary to ground belief in Hannibal's exploit. ("Miracles and Testimony," p. 130)

This is true for Christian apologists who have little or no experience with witnessing with their own eyes a genuine miracle. But empirically verifying a (claimed) miracle would only strengthen their philosophical arguments.

Conclusion

Miracles happening today are not a theoretical possibility for those who experience them. The same is true for those who witness them with their own eyes. Miracles are real. They happen.

"A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence" (Hume, p. 110).

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January 20, 2007

Miracles and New Testament Studies: Conclusion

By [James Arlandson](#)

The purpose of the series on miracles has been to keep the door to miracles open. If it is slammed shut before they have a chance to be investigated, then that answers the question always in favor of a closed natural system that excludes the *supernatural*.

The purpose of the previous article ("Do Miracles Happen Today?") is to explore the reports of miracles in the age of science and technology. The results say that this modern age does not shut the door on them, contrary to the belief of David Friedrich Strauss and Rudolf Bultmann, two prominent New Testament critics who doubt the supernatural "world picture" assumed in the Gospels. They say that the first-century Gospel writers took in too much of their own age that believed naively in a three-story cosmos and miracles and a wonder world, but it seems that the modern scholars absorbed too much skepticism and confidence in a "cause and effect nexus" that "suffers no intrusion" from a divine world. The irony is rich.

This summary article draws some conclusions about the series.

The historical context

New Testament miracles, particularly healings, have increased exponentially today. The Pentecostal Movement surged in the early twentieth century and then gathered even more momentum in the Charismatic Renewal in the last third of the same century, both going strong up to the present day. (This brief synopsis does not include the healing movement in the 1940s and 1950s in America.) This worldwide surge lifts miracles into the realm of observable, verifiable facts. It provides an environment where miracles can flourish. Such miracles are different from a strictly personal experience that no one can verify or that everyone can claim. It may be true that some "miracles" are psychologically induced or deceptively declared as real, but many are indeed genuine; as such, they contradict hyper-skepticism or strong rationalism—at the very least they should make hyper-skeptics and strong rationalists pause a brief moment. What if it's all true?

Miracles and Hyper-skepticism

Because of the reality of miracles today, much like the ones described in the New Testament, all is not lost in recovering truths in narratives that include supernatural or so-called "mythic" elements, such as

the "three-story cosmos" decried by Bultmann. We do not need to sacrifice miracles on the altar of rationalism to truly understand the New Testament. Healing miracles today that resemble those in the New Testament confirm the ancient miracles. For example, if a blind person sees or a lame person walks after prayer in Jesus' name, then they make the New Testament healing miracles plausible. The resemblance of the modern healing miracles with the New Testament healing miracles in turn supports the unique miracles of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Certainly they do not disconfirm the unique ones.

Further, if we need to draw timeless lessons from Gospel miracles, then this process of hermeneutics (interpretation) is legitimate, but it does not have to deny the reality of the miracles or a first-century worldview. We do not need to squeeze out the juice of deeper meaning and throw away the peel of "myth."

However, I do not advocate naïveté in our writings on New Testament history (see my own book [here](#), and read a sample chapter). But sometimes New Testament historians can lurch over into hyper-skepticism that pontificates over New Testament miracles. It is one thing to say that the early Christians *claim* or *believe* in the Resurrection, and to leave it at that (even though the historian may not believe this or wishes to remain neutral). But it is quite another to go on for pages on how wrong and gullible they were. This is what Strauss and Bultmann and other like them have done.

Such hyper-rationalism is especially disheartening in theology. Why not have supernatural presuppositions that say that God acts in his world? This is what many theologians enjoy, and they seem to appreciate the intellect and serious investigation into the Biblical text. The God-of-the-gaps, which invokes a divine intervention to answer a difficult or insolvable problem, does not have to rule over critical study. On the other side, neither should anything-but-a-miracle or anything-but-God prevail, particularly in theology and hermeneutics.

It is possible to believe, therefore, in the worldview of Jesus and still be a modern, relevant scholar or average reader of the Bible.

Jesus of History, Christ of Faith?

Ecce homo! Behold the man! Who is the "demythologized" Christ of faith and Jesus of history *today*, proclaimed by Strauss, Bultmann, and Jon Meacham? This disjointed person—a human Jesus first and then perhaps the Christ of faith (whoever that is)—is certainly not the one found in the New Testament. Is only his mind resurrected or not? Is he a spirit being of sorts? Is he a cloudy idea of the church's fictional preaching? If we believe something hard enough, does it thereby become true in fact? Who would want some sort of existential encounter with such a creature as that—coming from my own imagination? I certainly would not stake my entire life and eternal destiny on him or it.

We must be careful about reinterpreting Jesus Christ beyond all recognition, so that he fits into our modern sensibilities. This is especially true when they are built on the shifting sands of new philosophies that pop up from one decade to the next. This is what is happening with a post-modern Jesus and post-modern, post-structural New Testament interpretations. Rather, we should let the inspired text speak to

us-just as it is, miracles and all-rather than force our latest trends on to it.

Investigate!

I wrote in the previous article:

It is incumbent on all skeptics to investigate. (The meaning of *skepticism* in original Greek is "to look closely" or "to investigate"). Now technology provides a means to firm up the results of the investigation. X-rays reveal abnormalities, and CT scans show cancer, and they can confirm a miraculous healings, as a direct result of prayer. Representatives of science, medical doctors, for example, can be interviewed. A skeptic may follow up on a miracle to find out if the patient was suffering from temporary hysteria, and was not healed after all. I have seen reports on these "temporary miracles," but I have also seen reports that confirm that a miracle was genuine. Next, if completely blind eyes recovering sight can be filmed and verified that there was no "trick photography" or computer generated images, then why would anyone reject such reliable testimony, unless he started off willfully blind? Maybe the skeptic himself would like to attend religious gatherings or church services to investigate. With the leader's permission, maybe he can film a miracle. This would go a long way to eliminate any suspicion. Thus, technology as witness-honestly used-provides a powerful counter to question-begging rejection of *all* testimonies.

D. C. Lewis investigated the Harrogate conference fairly and scientifically. He concludes that miracles happened at the conference. Skeptics have a duty to their name to investigate. Mocking or cavalierly dismissing the list of miracles in "Do Miracles Happen Today?" would be unintellectual and prejudicial. If any of those miracles were proven to be untrue, then others could replace them in the worldwide Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements and other offshoots.

What about us today?

We can experience miracles today. They really do happen. Someone with completely non-functioning eyes can see after prayer in Jesus' name. Just because modern men and women do not witness such miracles does not mean that they do not happen. Modernists need to investigate before passing negative judgment. The age of science does not slam the door shut on miracles; in fact, technology can be used to verify them to the satisfaction of reasonable observers, not hyper-skeptical ones who are too eager to discredit them as miniature Bermuda triangles or as images of Jesus appearing in tortillas.

Since the Gospel miracles happened, the Gospel worldview is confirmed. It is the (bodily) resurrected Jesus Christ whom I encounter in my human existence, through the Spirit of the living God. He shapes and gives my existence purpose-a divine, existential act that is missing in people today, who drift around like icebergs, cold and isolated.

Other articles in this series, in this order:

Part One: [Miracles and New Testament Studies](http://www.americanthinker.com/printpage/?url=http://www...hinker.com/2007/01/miracles_and_new_testament_stu_1.html).