

Did Jesus (or anyone else) perform miracles?

Notes for a lecture delivered in London, December 11th, 2007

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The answer to that question depends on what you mean by ‘miracle’:

- Some use it to refer to a pleasant surprise. He’s done ‘miracles’ with that place. (Means that he has made an unexpected success of decorating his new home – but using ordinary means. It is a ‘miracle’ because it is unexpected and very good news.)
- It may be used of an unexpected and good event for which there is no known cause. (For example, someone may unexpectedly recover from a serious illness.)
- It might be taken to indicate that a person has very special powers. Thus, in the New Testament, the ‘miracle’ stories of Jesus were recounted in order to illustrate to people who he was and what authority he had.
- It may be used to describe an event which is ‘a violation of a law of nature’. In which case, it is the sort of thing which science might possibly explain, but at the moment cannot explain.

If what you mean by miracle is limited to the first two of these, there is no problem. We don’t know the cause of everything that happens, even if we assume that there is a perfectly rational and scientific explanation for it. Our knowledge is limited, but perhaps one day it will be fully explained.

The third of them is more important religiously. Accounts of Jesus’ miracles, and those of his followers, were written down in order to persuade people of Jesus’ authority and of his divine nature. And that applies to modern day religious people too:

The Catholic Church has the ‘Congregation for the Causes of the Saints’ which investigates accounts of miracles performed by those people who are being considered for canonisation – in other words, to become saints. You can’t become a Saint in the Catholic Church unless you have performed miracles. Why? Because they are taken as a sign of God’s action through that person, and therefore his endorsement of their status.

Investigations are made, witnesses interviewed, medical evidence is gathered. Something is only accepted as a miracle if there is strong evidence for it having taken place, and no scientific explanation.

And that last point brings us to the fourth way in which something may be described as a miracle – that it violates a law of nature. In other words, it goes against science.

Miracles and science:

With the rise of modern science, in the 17th century, the general view of the world was of an ordered mechanism. An argument about miracles, starting with that premise, comes from David Hume.

Hume was an **empiricist** – in other words, he believed that all knowledge is based on evidence that we gain through the senses, and which the mind then sorts out to give us the information we need.

Note: scientific laws are **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**. In other words, a ‘law of nature’ cannot dictate what **must** happen; it summarises what **has been found to happen**. Laws of nature sum up what we have observed.

Hume defines a miracle as ‘**a violation of a law of nature**’. He took the view that laws of nature were based on evidence. The more evidence we have, the more certain we are about them. For Hume, everything is a matter of probability, not certainty.

The more evidence, the higher the probability; that principle has been fundamental to science. Here Hume applies it to miracles:

‘A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined... The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), ‘That no testimony is ever 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 endeavours to establish;’...

from his *An Enquiry into Human Understanding*

He argues that, since we proportion belief to evidence, there can never be enough evidence to prove that a miracle has taken place. It is always going to be more likely that the person reporting it was mistaken.

BUT notice that Hume’s argument is **not** that miracles cannot happen, but that – given the amount of evidence that has established and confirms a law of nature – there can never be sufficient evidence to **prove** that a law of nature has been violated.

Science is never absolute – it is simply the best interpretation of evidence. BUT that does not let miracles off the hook, because the scientific method assumes that, if all the evidence were known, then we would be able to explain why everything happens. In practice we don’t know all the evidence, all the possible variations that make each event unique – hence we should be cautious in saying that we know anything for certain. BUT certainty is exactly what the religious believer, checking on the account of a miracle, is hoping to achieve.

Of course, Hume was taking a rational view, not a religious one. But let’s consider how two religious philosophers describe miracles...

Aquinas (13th century) in *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Miracles are ‘those things done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature.’

In other words, for Aquinas, miracles can’t simply be coincidences for which there could be a scientific explanation, they must show divine agency.

Eric Mascall (20th century), describes as miracle as ‘a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified.’

So whatever else it might be, a traditional Christian view is that a miracle must go against what is observed in nature, and must be a sign of divine intervention.

This is important, because it relates to so many other religious issues. For example:

- If you believe in miracles, you must believe in a God who interferes in the workings of nature. But what sort of God could that be? If people argue that nature is designed in such a way as to reflect the intentions of a loving God, does that not exclude miracles? If God needs a miracle to put something right, should he not be blamed for getting it wrong in the first place? So an understanding of miracles impinges on our understanding of ‘God’. In a well-ordered world, miracles should not be necessary.
- Are miracles moral? If one person is saved when 99 are killed, can that person claim that they were spared through a miracle? And, if they do, does that not imply that the 99 who were killed were victims of God’s ill-will or indifference?

Trivial miracles

If you Google ‘miracles’ you’ll soon end up with sites showing you the ‘Crosses of Light’ – these are cross shaped patterns that have been seen in bathroom windows, at certain times of day, or when light is shining from a particular angle outside. No matter that it’s not the shape of the thing on which Jesus was executed, any cross shape will do as a sign from God.

[One image was presented at the lecture - more are available from the El Monte site or similar sites.]

Share International reported on the phenomena of these crosses in El Monte, in Southern California in 1988 ‘As word spread about the cross, crowds began lining up to see the phenomenon. While viewing the cross, people kneel and pray, say a rosary, cry, and even faint.’

The Los Angeles Herald Examiner was reported to have commented:

‘Whether or not a miracle exists, it is clear that many people in Los Angeles want desperately to see and touch a fingerprint of the creator. All but the most committed atheist would like to have a sign, any sign. Everyone wants to know that we are here for a reason, and that a higher entity stopped by to sell us so.’

I call these miracles ‘trivial’ because they are not significant in themselves – as would be the case, for example, of someone being instantaneously healed of a deadly disease – but only for the effect they have upon the people who witness them. It illustrates that the desire to see a sign, and the religious feelings evoked, are the important phenomenon, not the actual thing itself.

Back in the 19th century, the philosopher Feuerbach argued that miracles were projections of people’s desires. In other words, you want something to happen – for someone to be cured, for example – and think that, in a world created and ordered by God, it ought to be the case. If that thing you want actually happens, it is therefore interpreted in terms of that idea of God – but it is an idea that you have projected onto the event, it is not part of the event itself.

Miracles are not shown by analysis

You can describe something totally, and yet you will find nothing in that description that corresponds to the word ‘miracle’. Not surprising – you could cut me up into little pieces, examine all my individual tissues, including my brain, but you would not find the word ‘Mel’ imprinted on any of them. But if someone says that ‘Mel’ does not exist, that only means that ‘Mel’ is a conventional way of describing the bundle of living organs that comprises ‘me’. When the Catholic Church investigates a miracle, it does no more than try to establish the facts, and to establish that there was no existing medical or scientific explanation.

What about the Bible accounts of miracles...

Clearly, if we are to take the Bible literally, those who wrote it believed that events were not determined by fixed laws of nature, but were the result of the action of God or of the devil, or angels, or evil spirits. Hence, if something unusual happened, they would naturally ask ‘Why did God choose to act in this way?’ If everything reflects God’s purpose, then the unusual is a most clear example of what he wants to happen. That is very different from a scientific question about the reason for an event.

Biblical accounts are not science, nor do or did they ever pretend to be. They are religious writings, interpreting events – some perfectly normal, others unusual – to make a point about belief in God and what follows from it.

And they are (by rational standards) morally ambiguous. The fall of the walls of Jericho might have been seen as a miracle, since the account says that the instructions for marching round the city and shouting were given by ‘the commander of the army of the Lord’. Some might argue that the stamping feet and shouting might have weakened the foundations – but that seems a bit far fetched. But what happens after that (Joshua 6:21) – ‘They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.’

You may, of course, say that accounts of Jesus healing the sick were of a different moral order from that. But the principle is the same – there is a special power at work, bringing about a result that has God’s approval, and people respond accordingly.

Specialness and meaning

Even today, religious people sometimes ask ‘Why should this happen to me?’ when something goes wrong, they may pray for God to help in a situation of suffering, and they may refer to a fortunate and unexpected event that follows such prayer as a ‘miracle’.

Unless an event has religious meaning, it is not likely to be called a miracle. So the explanation of miracles in terms of a freak events is not really going to solve anything. It’s not a miracle because it’s unique – every event is unique in some respects – but because it is significant.

Interpretation

What makes something ‘religious’ is generally a matter of **interpretation**, rather than fact. Religious people may argue that a miracle is an event that is seen as having **special significance in showing God’s will**, not necessarily something against a law of nature. But, if so:

Why are miracles necessary in a world ruled by an all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God? Why should anyone pray for a miracle, if God would otherwise not perform it? Does that not imply that he is less than all-loving etc?

Regularity?

The Cosmological and Teleological arguments for the existence of God were based on the idea that the world displayed a regularity and design, which suggested the existence of a divine designer. This creates problems for the idea of miracles because:

- If the regularity and predictable nature of the world suggests that it is sustained and guided by God, ‘miracles’ – which go against that regularity – are an argument **against** God.

Hence, **your view on miracles is a good indication of your view on God.**

- Is God the name we give to the overall meaning and purpose of the universe – the source of whatever is loving and creative? If so, fine: but you are likely to see God in every event, not just in those that are absolutely unlikely, or miraculous.
- Or is God the name you give to a particular personal being who can come and interfere in the normal working of the universe, a being who will respond to requests if he or she chooses, and who will selectively choose to make things better or worse? If so, you are indeed going to look for miracles as evidence of God’s activity, but you will then have to explain the resulting sense of unfairness.

So: Back to the original question – Did Jesus (or anyone else) perform miracles?

First – be clear that an event is an event. One person may call it a miracle, another may not. So the fact that something unusual happened (e.g. someone revived after they were thought to have died), even if factually correct, does not in itself show that it was the working of some supernatural force. Random and utterly improbable bad luck is not deemed a miracle.

Second – look at the evidence. Weigh up the probability of something unusual having happened with the possibility that the evidence for it was mistaken. And – like Hume – check whether the person giving that evidence has any personal reason to present it in a particular way (i.e. to make it seem more definite, or to give a religious interpretation).

And then, the final check... If someone does perform a miracle (in the strongest, literal sense), is it because of his or her own unusual powers (mind over matter) or simply because he or she is a vehicle for some divine power?

Miracles (along with the ‘problem of evil’) present most clearly the issues and problems for anyone who believes in God – if you know a person’s view on miracles, you know almost all you need to know about their view of God.

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