

# DO MIRACLES HAPPEN?

During the course of our lives we see many things that amaze us and fill us with wonder. And we often refer to these things as being miraculous. But none of them are necessarily miracles. A miracle is an extraordinary event that is the product of a God that is purposeful, benevolent, and intending to communicate. This does not mean that God is only occasionally present and that every once in a while he chooses to interrupt or intervene. The God of the Bible is in control of all things and his normal and sustaining work creates regularity. A miracle is when God works in a way other than his normal and regular action. And He does this to instill awe at His nature and to achieve the good end He desires.

God has created and sustains the universe in patterns that we describe as natural laws, such as the law of gravity. A miracle is often mischaracterized as a suspension or violation of these laws. However, miracles may be more accurately described as revealing an element that does not normally present itself in how the world works and is therefore not accounted for by the natural laws.

To illustrate this idea, picture a vase falling off a table. The law of gravity says the vase will continue falling until it hits the floor. The fall of the vase is a naturally occurring event and is predictable as long as no other factors are present or at work. But if you are standing next to the table and catch the vase, has the law of gravity been violated? Of course not. The law of gravity does not and cannot account for the behavior of a freely acting agent who chooses to interrupt the fall of the vase. Whether or not you choose to catch the vase, the law of gravity is still in force. If God exists then He is always in the room, always in control of the vase, and, as a free agent, has the ability to act extraordinarily at any time.

The methods used by scientists in their work are based on the principles of uniformity and regularity. Some people think if miracles occurred it would upset the natural order and thus render the scientific method useless. But there are almost always unknown factors and agents at work in the physical world and many events cannot be predicted regardless of scientific knowledge. For example, for all our knowledge of civil and mechanical engineering and psychology we still cannot predict car crashes. But that doesn't make us skeptical of the ability to have scientific knowledge.

Miracles are vehicles God uses to communicate purposefully and specifically. They are events that betray an intelligent action. The normalcy and regularity of the universe equip us to recognize such extraordinary events. When a claim of a miraculous event is made it is a claim of intelligent action by a powerful, transcendent being in an extraordinary way.

Miracles need to be investigated as non-uniform, irregular, purposeful events. As such, natural science has no place at the table other than establishing what is normal and regular. Science is not the sole method of explanation for this world, nor does it trump or carry more weight than other ways of knowing. Other methods of explanation, such as philosophy, are not subject to natural science. Both science and philosophy exercise authority for offering explanations, but

not in the same arenas. Explanatory disciplines conflict when one is used to try to explain what is outside its sphere and belongs to another. Thus, natural science does not show that miracles cannot happen. It does, however, help to equip us to recognize miracles if they were to occur.

It is probably safe to say that the majority of people we know do not claim to have witnessed a miracle. Skeptics of God's existence have often seized on this as evidence against miracles. But just because something happens rarely or even only once in the course of history does not mean there can be no good reason to believe it occurred. To demonstrate this, picture Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C. We know with great certainty that plays were performed there regularly from 1863 to 1865. But we also know with great certainty that on April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was shot while watching a play in Ford's Theatre. Just because Abraham Lincoln was assassinated only once does not make it historically suspect. And just because his assassination was improbable does not mean there is a lack of evidence regarding the facts. The frequency of an event and the evidence for the occurrence of a one-time event are two entirely different matters.

Consider another example. The odds of winning the Grand Prize in the Powerball lottery are over 120 million to 1. Using the skeptic's reasoning, there is no good reason to believe that anyone has ever won the lottery. But a number of people have actually won the Powerball Grand Prize despite the odds. The rarity of the feat says nothing about the ability to know it occurred.

The same can be said for miracles. In fact it is the infrequency of miracles that give them their force. After all, the parting of the Red Sea wouldn't be news if it happened fairly often.

If miracles are extraordinary, intentional occurrences performed by God, what is their purpose? There are many miracles in the New Testament that give us the answer. For example, in John 11:38-44 we read of the raising of Lazarus:

Then Jesus, angry in Himself again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. "Remove the stone," Jesus said. Martha, the dead man's sister, told Him, "Lord, he already stinks. It's been four days." Jesus said to her, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You heard Me. I know that You always hear Me, but because of the crowd standing here I said this, so they may believe You sent Me." After He said this, He shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out bound hand and foot with linen strips and with his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him and let him go."

Jesus indicates the purpose for raising Lazarus was to display God's glory. He also says the purpose of the miracle is to authenticate His ministry as being from God. The character of the miracle itself is good; Lazarus is raised from the dead and returned to the family that mourns him

This miracle is representative of miracles in the New Testament and shows they have a threefold purpose:

- to give God credit for being the source of the miracle
- to authenticate the claims of the miracle worker, and

- the benevolent character of the miracle

If the New Testament is truly the continued and final revelation of the God described in the Old Testament then we should see the same pattern regarding miracles in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14:13-18 indeed shows the same pattern:

But Moses said to the people, “Don’t be afraid. Stand firm and see the Lord’s salvation He will provide for you today; for the Egyptians you see today, you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you must be quiet.” The Lord said to Moses, “...As for you, lift up your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I am going to harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them, and I will receive glory by means of Pharaoh, all his army, and his chariots and horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I receive glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

The power of the miracle is attributed to God. We see Moses obeying God’s directions to accomplish the work. The purpose of the miracle is to demonstrate God’s sovereignty and provision to the people of Israel as well as to their enemies. The character of the miracle is ultimately good because it frees an entire nation of people from bondage and slavery.

As in the New Testament, the Old Testament’s miracles consistently attribute their source to God; are purposeful and benevolent in character. This becomes an extremely important point because the existence of miracles and their accurate documentation in the Bible help to authenticate the Bible as an authoritative book containing the word of God.

Some miracles recorded in the Bible and attributed to God may, at first reading, seem cruel or contradictory to the idea of a benevolent God. The flood of Noah, for example, doesn’t seem to correspond with the idea of a God of love. But we must remember that love is not God’s only attribute. He is also righteous and just. Because God is righteous He cannot abide evil. It is a good thing for evil to be punished and its appropriate punishment is death – the wages of sin. To punish evil appropriately is a good thing and is called justice. Thus the flood is not an act of a cruel God, but of a righteous, just God who loves us so much that He revealed to us a plan of salvation that can satisfy His righteousness while also justly punishing the evil we have done. Noah embraced the promises of God but no one else did which resulted in their righteous judgment and destruction.

The Bible also records miracles and signs that were not done by God or His prophets, but by those who rejected Him or acted against Him. For example we find this in Exodus 6:11-12 when Pharaoh’s magicians match the miracles of Moses and Aaron step for step. In the New Testament we see this in a number of places as well. Acts 16:16-24 records a non-Christian girl’s ability to foretell the future. And Revelation tells of the second beast who will perform many signs (Rev 13:11-14).

A number of things must be taken into account when considering these miracles.

- First, in every case the God of the Bible is denied and a false Gospel is proclaimed.
- Second, their purposes are not benevolent but self-serving. In the case of Pharaoh’s magicians it was the retention of valuable slaves and the refusal of Pharaoh to

acknowledge a higher power than himself. The girl who divined the future did so to make money for her keepers. And the beast of Revelation is attempting to usurp the place rightfully held by God Himself.

- Third, in each case God responds these miracles with a demonstration of His power that proves His position of ultimate authority over these lesser powers. Not only did Aaron's staff/snake eat the others who copied him but God followed the incident by sending the 10 plagues of judgment, an undeniable display of power that resulted in Israel's freedom. The fortune-teller of Acts had the spirit which gave her the power exercised by Paul. And the beast of Revelation proves to be no match for the God of the universe. The miracles of God proclaim him to be Lord over all things, unbelieving thought included.
- Fourth, the power to do these signs and wonders is not denied by scripture but at the same time the power is not supernatural. The Bible speaks of a class of beings that are spirits not subject to what we call natural laws. These are angels and fallen angels or demons. They are capable of things that appear miraculous to human beings but are natural to them. When an angel does something, however, the source of the miracle is supernatural since it is done at the direction of God. But a demon does these things for deceitful reasons meant to take away attention from God. As created beings, the demon's power is not supernatural but supernormal. They may act outside of what is normal to us but not outside what is normal to them. They are not transcendent from the world they manipulate and do not act on the direction of such a being.

Thus, when we see signs and wonders in the Bible performed by those who deny the God proclaimed by the Bible we may characterize them as false miracles. They are false not in the sense that they are not marvelous works but in the sense that they reveal blasphemy and promote unbelief through deceit of the nature of their power.

The difficulty of making the claim that miracles authenticate the Bible, and therefore Christianity, is that almost all religions point to miracles to authenticate their scriptures and their view of God. But if each religion claims miracles as a method of authentication then don't the miracles cancel each other out and ultimately prove nothing? In order to answer this question we must look at the miracles of other religions. If they present the same characteristics as the biblical miracles then miracles don't authenticate anything and are nothing more than entertaining stories. However, if the miracles of other religions are substantially different in nature from the biblical miracles, then the Bible may not be so easily dismissed.

## **BUDDHISM**

There are several schools of Buddhist thought, each with its own tradition of scripture. The *Dhammapada* is among the earliest of these traditions and contains the sayings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. The *Dhammapada* is divided into 26 chapters and contains 423 verses. The verses are accompanied by stories intended to illuminate and explain them. Whether these stories are myth or history is apparently somewhat debated among Buddhist scholars.

A good example of a Buddhist miracle is found in chapter 25 section 12 of the *Dhammapada* stories (illustrating verse 382). It tells of a young Buddhist monk who, because of his good karma, gained supernormal powers. Once when his master was sick, the monk flew to a far away lake to fetch some water. Later, the monk was brought before the Buddha. The Buddha wished for his disciples to observe the young monk's rare qualities and so asked the monk to bring some water from the same faraway lake. Again, the young monk flew through the air to retrieve the water. The other monks witnessed this miracle and reported it to the Buddha. The Buddha

replied, "Monks, one who practices the Dhamma zealously is capable of attaining supernormal powers even though he is young."

The miracle is attributed to the individual performing the miracle. The purpose of the miracle is to demonstrate that anyone who has the discipline to practice Dhamma can attain supernormal powers, a rather selfish endeavor, and the Dhamma leads to self-enlightenment, also a selfish endeavor. Although the character of the miracle in the first trip for water is good, in the second instance it is frivolous.

Thus, the miracles found in Buddhism are not like the biblical miracles. They differ in their source, their purpose, and their character. Buddhist miracles focus on the aggrandizement of the individual while biblical miracles glorify a benevolent, transcendent, powerful God.

## **HINDUISM**

In Hinduism, part of the Hindu scriptures is called the Puranas. In the Puranas 2.5.5 we read:

Once, Narad and Parvat were traveling through an aerial route, while they were flying over Khandav forest, they were lured by the beautiful sight of river Yamuna. They decided to take rest for a while. Both of them descended down and entered river Yamuna to take their bath.

Other powers are mentioned in the Puranas 17.1.7 and include knowledge of past, present, and future events, the ability to hear abnormal sounds, the ability to make whatever one says come true, and seeing the invisible. The source of these miraculous power comes from the individuals involved. The purpose of the power is self-serving or self-aggrandizing. The character of these miraculous powers is not inherently good.

Interestingly, a famous Hindu miracle happened in our own time. On September 21, 1995, a miracle began in New Dehli and quickly spread around the globe. Apparently a man dreamed that the Lord Ganesha, a Hindu god who is portrayed in the form of an elephant, desired milk. The man went at once to the temple, not even waiting for daybreak, and convinced the priest to allow a spoonful of milk to be offered to the stone statue. As both men watched, the milk was consumed by the statue. It continued to accept offerings of milk for the rest of that day. By that time word of the miracle had not only brought New Dehli to a standstill as people dropped whatever they were doing to make milk offerings, but all of India flocked to the temples. Offerings of milk were accepted by statues of other gods as well, not just Ganesha. Also, the statues varied in material, some were stone, and some were copper. Then, 24 hours after it began, the miracles in India stopped. Throughout the next several days the miracle was repeated around the globe in places such as New York, Los Angeles, and Canada.

In this miracle we see the source of the miracle attributed to one or more god in Hindu's pantheon. The purpose of the miracle is unknown, and no good resulted from the miracle (except for those who sold milk).

Because Hinduism teaches that God is ultimately impersonal, miracles can have no purpose and no message can be conveyed through a prophet or any other way. Also, the miracles found in Hinduism do not display a benevolent character. Rather, Hindu miracles are self-aggrandizing, magnifying the doer of the miracle instead of a God who wishes to make Himself known and bring about good. Ultimately, Hindu miracles are meaningless and lack goodness.

## ISLAM

The sacred scripture of Islam is the Quran. It is attributed to Allah's prophet, Muhammad, and is said to be the final revelation of God. Surprisingly, the Quran attributes no miracles to Muhammad, with one possible exception—the Quran itself. In Sura 29:50-52, Muhammad admits he has performed no miracle by calling himself a “plain warner:”

They said, “If only miracles could  
come down to him from his Lord!”  
Say, “All miracles come only from GOD;  
I am no more than a plain warner.”

Is it not enough of a miracle  
that we sent down to you  
this book, being recited to them?  
This is indeed a mercy and a  
reminder for people who believe.

Say, “GOD suffices as a witness  
between me and you. He knows  
everything in the heavens and the earth.  
Surely, those who believe in falsehood  
and disbelieve in GOD are the real losers.”

Non-Muslims and even some Muslims see this as a clear statement in the Quran that Muhammad did no miracles. But many Muslims believe that this passage claims the Quran itself is his miracle. If the first interpretation is correct and Muhammad did no miracles, then he cannot be a prophet since there is no divine authentication. Sura 17:90-93 is used to support this view. In this passage Muhammad is challenged to do a miracle to authenticate his claim of being Allah's prophet to which he responds, “Glory be to my Lord, Am I any more than a human messenger?”

However, if the second interpretation is correct, then we see a circular argument. The reason given for believing that Muhammad is a prophet is that it is stated in the Quran, the final revelation of God. But the reason given to believe in the Quran as the word of God is that Allah's prophet Muhammad says it is the word of God. And around it goes. And unlike Moses, Muhammad did not receive this revelation in full view of a nation. Rather, he received it in secret, making it suspect. If the Quran is Muhammad's miracle it then the God it describes is not the God of the Bible (as Islam claims). Unlike the God of the Quran, the God of the Bible, without exception, made a distinction between his message, his messenger, and the miracle that would authenticate the messenger.

But this challenge is taken up by the Hadith, writings that record the sayings and works of Muhammad. Some books in the Hadith are considered more accurate and valuable than others. The two most highly revered and early books are the Sahih Bukhari Hadith and the Sahih Muslim Hadith and date in the ninth century, 200 years or so after Muhammad's death.

The Hadith claims Muhammad did do miracles. For example, according to the Sahih Bukhari 5.208.

That the Meccan people asked Allah's Apostle to show them a miracle. So he showed them the moon split into two halves between which they saw the Hiram Mountain.

If we overlook the problem of the Hadith and the Quran contradicting each other, we see miracles in the Hadith whose source is not attributed to God, whose purpose is not apparent, and whose character is not benevolent. Whether the Hadith is considered or not, the miracles of Islam are clearly not the same kinds of things as are found in the Bible.

Thus, we find that miracles are neither unscientific nor exempt from historical investigation. We also see that the miracles of the Bible are quite different from miracles of other religions. Biblical miracles uniquely point to a transcendent, personal God as their source, they are purposeful and intentional, and they are benevolent in character. Therefore, although other religions claim miracles in their traditions, they are speaking of different kinds of events that cannot cancel out the authenticating power of the miracles found in the Bible.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

##### ***Apologetics Study Bible Articles:***

Are Miracles Believable? By Ronald H. Nash, 96

Are Biblical Miracles Imitations of Pagan Myths? By Gary R. Habermas, 1430

##### **Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics***

Chapter 9, Do Miracles Happen?

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Can you think of a miracle from another religion that would compete with a biblical miracle in its source, purpose, and power?
2. Can you think of a biblical miracle that does not share the characteristics in the examples given?
3. What are some miracle claims you know of that have happened recently? Do they share the same characteristics as biblical miracles?
4. How would you respond to someone who rejects the possibility of miracles because they are unscientific?
5. Why is it not accurate (or at least misleading) to think of a miracle as a suspension of the laws of nature?