

“Miracles and Historical Investigation”

A miracle is an event that is brought about directly or indirectly by God and that cannot be explained in terms of natural laws. Natural laws describe how things normally happen in the world. Miracles are abnormal occurrences. Creation monotheists have good reason to believe that miracles are possible, since they believe that there is a perfect God. Since a perfect God is omnipotent, he would be able to cause a miracle to occur. Since such a God is supremely good, if he should ever have a good end that could be brought about by means that involve a miracle, he may sometime have a reason to perform a miracle. So it is reasonable for creation monotheists to believe that God could, and perhaps in some circumstances, that God would, produce a miraculous event.

Could we ever have adequate reason to believe that a *particular* miracle claim or report is true? The case for the rationality of a *general* belief in the possibility and probability of miracles is philosophical and theological, whereas a case for any particular miracle will need to be historical and to proceed on a case by case basis. Such a case will need to be constructed by means of a careful examination of each narrative in which it is reported that a miracle has occurred. But some critical historians have argued that it is not possible or legitimate to argue on historical grounds that a specific miracle report is true.¹ The purpose of this paper is to discuss some reasons why they think so, and to suggest ways that Christians can reply.

Objection 1: Miracle Reports are Unreliable or Mythological

Here's one argument for this critical claim about miracles and historical research:

- (1) Any narrative containing miracle stories (such as the four canonical Gospels) is either historically unreliable or not a work of history at all, but instead mythological.
- (2) If a narrative is either historically unreliable or mythological, then it would be impossible to provide a good argument for the historicity of any story contained in the document.
- (3) Thus, historical investigation cannot confirm that a miracle has occurred.

¹ See Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) for the most recent extended attempt to make a case for this claim.

Though this has been a popular kind of argument, it should be clear on reflection that the first premise is unacceptable. This is because the only good reason one could give for endorsing premise (1) is that either miracles are impossible or it is generally unreasonable to think that miracles could ever occur. But we have seen that there is good reason to deny this assumption from a creation monotheist standpoint. Miracles are both possible and even probable from that perspective. So, the presence of miracle stories in the Gospel narratives does not automatically render those stories either historically unreliable or mythological. They are clearly not mythological, because though their authors' primary aims are theological in a broad sense (evangelistic, apologetic, and pastoral), it is certainly an important part of their theological aims to provide a reliable historical account of the earthly career of Jesus. Whether or not there are good historical reasons to accept the truth of any miracle stories contained in them is not something to be decided on philosophical grounds.

Objection 2: Historians Should Appeal to Natural Causes Only

A second kind of argument concedes that miracles are possible and that narratives that report them are not necessarily unreliable. However, it rules out the appropriateness of historical arguments for miracles on the ground that history is a *science*:

- (4) Scientific historians should appeal only to *natural* causes in formulating historical explanations of historical events.
- (5) If (4) is true, then it is illegitimate to explain any historical events in terms of supernatural (and thus miraculous) causes.
- (6) So no good historical case can be made for the existence of a miracle.

Premise (4) is an application to the science of history of the thesis of “methodological naturalism,” which is the claim that scientists should employ the method of appealing only to natural causes in formulating their scientific theories. There are good reasons for historians to subscribe to this *sort* of principle, but its formulation in premise (4) makes it too restrictive. A more plausible and less restrictive version of the thesis will allow for the legitimacy of historical arguments for the truth of particular miracle stories. This more acceptable version is that historians should seek a natural cause for historical events for which they are seeking explanations *unless there are sufficient reasons to think that these events do not have a natural cause*. What makes this a (weak) variety of methodological naturalism is that it dictates that

historical methodology should be guided by a *presumption* that historical events have natural causes. However, unlike its stronger cousin, it allows that this presumption could be overridden. What makes this less constraining principle more plausible is that it encourages a healthy but not overly extreme skepticism about miracle reports. We should be at least initially skeptical of any miracle story because miracles are, by definition, *rare* divine acts. However, we should not be *too* skeptical, because from a creation monotheist perspective we have good reasons (as I suggested earlier) to think that God will sometimes act in history in extraordinary, non-natural ways.²

Objection 3: Historical Objectivity Precludes Historical Bias

Now it might be objected here that as scientists, historians have an obligation to be *objective* in their work, and that this means that they need to set all their biases, presuppositions, and faith commitments aside. In my reply to the first argument against an historical approach to miracles, I insisted that miracles not be ruled out on metaphysical grounds by assuming, for instance, that metaphysical naturalism is true and that miracles are consequently impossible. But in my reply just now to the second argument, I appealed to creation monotheism as a reason to be open to the rationality of believing a miracle report on historical grounds. Isn't this a metaphysical and religious bias that should be ruled out as well? These considerations lead to a third argument against using historical evidence to support a miracle claim:

- (7) Historians have an obligation to be objective in formulating their historical explanations by not allowing their biases, presuppositions and faith commitments to influence their judgment.
- (8) But it is reasonable to infer that an historical event requires a supernatural (miraculous) cause only if one assumes that God exists.
- (9) So historians have an obligation not to posit a supernatural cause to explain an historical event.

Here the problem is with premise (7). In spite of its superficial appeal (it's hard to deny that complete objectivity would be a good thing), it is arguably false in virtue of the reasonable assumptions that (a) we have an obligation to do only those things that we *can* do, and (b) we

² Steve Davis provides a similar reply to this sort of objection in *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

cannot be completely objective in historical investigation. For one thing, historians must have faith in the historical method as a reliable means of discerning and explaining historical facts. For another, historians cannot help but to make value judgments about what questions are worth asking about the past, what counts as good historical evidence, and how best to interpret that evidence. Historians disagree about these things and there is no completely objective way for them to settle these disputes. Moreover, there is no good reason for historians to leave their religious and metaphysical assumptions aside in doing history. If the historians' goal is to determine and explain what happened in the past, it would make sense for them to make use of everything it is reasonable for them to believe to achieve this goal. Now of course this means that it is perfectly appropriate for metaphysical naturalists to assume that miracles do not ever occur. But this does not give them the right to insist (as in the first and second objections above) that creation monotheists may not appeal to supernatural causes in an historical explanation if it seems appropriate from that metaphysical perspective. What is important is that one's metaphysical assumptions should not be allowed to settle historical questions without sufficiently careful and critical evaluation of the historical evidence available.

Objection 4: Necessary Proof of Testimonial Reliability is not Available

A fourth and final critique of an historical approach to the confirmation of a miracle report accepts the possibility of miracles, the weaker principle of methodological naturalism, the legitimacy of appeal to one's metaphysical assumptions in determining the best explanation of the historical data and the probability that God would act miraculously in history at some time or other, but holds that the evidence for any *particular* miracle claim's being true is never adequate to make it reasonable, on historical grounds, to believe that it is. This argument focuses on the status and quality of *testimonial evidence*:

- (10) A successful historical case for a miracle depends on adequate testimonial evidence that the miracle has occurred.
- (11) Testimony can provide adequate evidence for the truth of a claim only if there is adequate *independent* evidence that the testimony is reliable.
- (12) But there is never adequate independent evidence to accept the reliability of testimony on behalf of a miracle claim.
- (13) So no historical argument for a miracle can be successful.

The objector will offer reasons in support of (12) similar to those rehearsed by Hume in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section X (“Of Miracles”). Generally speaking, the claim is that there is inadequate reason for thinking that those who claim to have witnessed a miracle have sufficient competence, caution, and character to be trusted as reliable. When the people in question are ancient sources, such as the people who contributed to the writing of the four New Testament Gospels, it is often also added that such pre-modern people generally cannot be trusted because of their pre-scientific cultural context and their consequent overly-credulous and uncritical acceptance of superstition and myth. It is generally assumed that only modern people (and especially trained scientific historians) are sufficiently objective and critical to be in a position to pass judgment on a miracle report.

This case for premise (12) seems both overly critical of ancient people and insufficiently critical of moderns. A more plausible view is that the ancients were more reliable than this *in spite of* their preconceptions and that modern people are less reliable than is assumed above *because of* their preconceptions. As I said above, *everyone* approaches historical questions with preconceptions. A realistic degree of objectivity requires, not setting these aside but instead being aware of them and making sure that one employs them with appropriate caution. In view of our common humanity, it seems reasonable to think that both ancients and moderns are capable of this sort of critical employment of their presuppositions. So the case the objector makes for (12) is problematic.

However, the real problem with the above argument is with premise (11). To see why, consider what would count as “adequate independent evidence” for the reliability of the testimony of other people as a general source for your beliefs. Such evidence would need to be absolutely independent of what other people tell you, either directly or indirectly (through written communication, for instance), because evidence that consists in what *others* say is itself a form of testimony, and this is the kind of evidence that (11) says we need to *show* to be reliable. The only kind of evidence left over for this purpose is evidence you acquire by means of your own observations, memories of your own observations and inferences from this evidence. But it seems clear that this kind of evidence will never be enough to justify your belief in the reliability of another person’s testimony, especially when this other person is no longer alive. And even if a person is still alive, it would be very difficult for you to show that he or she is a generally reliable source of testimonial evidence solely on the basis of your own observations of that

person. For one thing, much of the evidence you would need for this claim would need to come from other people who have observed this person when you have not. Obviously, in the case of people who are dead such a testimony-independent observational confirmation of the reliability of their testimony is impossible.

So if testimony is to have any evidential value for us at all, we must take it as a *basic or foundational source of evidence* that does not require independent evidence for its reliability. We must treat the testimony of others as having a presumption of reliability unless we have good reasons for thinking that it is unreliable. That is, we must take an “innocent unless proven guilty” approach to testimony as evidence. Thus, the burden of proof is on someone who claims that a particular witness is unreliable. This strengthens the case for the historical reliability of the Gospels, which are, after all, extended testimonies to the words and works of Jesus.³ It also shows that premise (12) is unacceptable, in which case this fourth objection fails.

Conclusion

I began this paper by posing the question whether we could ever have adequate reason to believe that a *particular* miracle claim or report is true. I then considered four arguments that purport to show that the answer to this question is “no.” In each case, I argued that it is reasonable to doubt or deny at least one premise of the argument. Of course it does not follow from this that our question has an affirmative answer. However, I hope to have removed some important obstacles in the way of providing adequate historical grounds for accepting the particular miracle claims in the Gospels as being probably true.

³ In *The Historical Christ & The Jesus of Faith*, C. Stephen Evans employs this sort of argument to criticize Van Harvey’s assumption (in *The Historian and the Believer*) that testimonial evidence needs independent evidential support. Evans attributes this critique of evidentialism about testimony to C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79-100.