

Anti-Supernaturalism and Biblical Miracles

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: The purpose of the feature article in this month's issue of *Reason & Revelation* is to refute the idea that miracles still occur today. However, in order to avoid any possible confusion regarding our position on the subject of biblical miracles in general, I felt this would be an appropriate place to offer a defense of the fact that, in the past, as it was consistent with His divine will, God **did** employ miracles on a variety of occasions. The material that follows provides a discussion of that concept.]

During biblical times, miracles played an important part in God's workings amidst humankind. Their purpose and design was to validate as truthful the claim and/or message of the one demonstrating the supernatural power. This was true, for example, in the Old Testament. Exodus 4:28-31 records:

And Moses told Aaron all the words of Jehovah wherewith he had sent him, and all the signs wherewith he had charged him. And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: **and Aaron spake all the words which Jehovah had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed:** and when they heard that Jehovah had visited the children of Israel, and that he had seen their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped (emp. added).

It also was true in the New Testament. In Acts 14:1-3, Luke wrote:

And it came to pass in Iconium that they [Paul and Barnabas—BT] entered together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake that a great multitude both of Jews and of Greeks believed. But the Jews that were disobedient stirred up the souls of the Gentiles, and made them evil affected against the brethren. A long time, therefore, they tarried there, **speaking boldly in the Lord, who bare witness unto the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands** (emp. added).

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus performed miracles to confirm His affirmation that the kingdom of God was near. Later, His claim of being the Son of God was shown to be reliable by the signs that He did (John 5:19-29). When the apostles proclaimed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, their message was verified by the mighty works they demonstrated (see McGarvey, 1910, pp. 353ff.). Any attack upon the miracles of the Bible, therefore, is an assault upon the claims and authority of the Godhead.

Over the millennia, numerous men and women have stepped forward to espouse a vitriolic anti-supernaturalism that denies the existence, or even the possibility, of miracles. Frenchman Francois Marie Arouet (1694-1778)—better known to us as Voltaire—was one such person. He was a devout opponent of religion who initiated his attack with what today would be styled “higher criticism,” through which he called into question the authenticity and reliability of the Bible itself. He then alleged chronological contradictions in the narratives of the Old Testament. He challenged as incorrect many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, and he resolutely denied any such things as the efficacy of prayer or miracles.

Scotsman David Hume (1711-1776) was another anti-supernaturalist. According to philosopher B.A.G. Fuller, Hume, in his various works, taught that:

...the entire concept of God as the **author** of anything is extremely dubious.... In the *Enquiry*, also, and in the *Dialogues on Religion*, he points out that even granting we could infer the existence of God from the universe, we should have no right to ascribe to him more wisdom or goodness or power than is actually displayed in the universe, which is his work.... As the universe stands, it does not suggest the existence of a Deity both all good and all powerful (1945, p. 171, emp. in orig.).

Hume attacked the idea of the immortality of the soul, and placed the origin of religion on a par with things like “elves” and “fairies.” Likely, he is most famous for his essay titled “Of Miracles,” which was tucked away in his work, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1748. The essay itself consists of scarcely more than 20 pages, and yet, as Colin Brown has suggested, “No work on miracles penned in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries receives greater attention today than Hume’s slim essay” (1984, p. 79). The essay naturally arranged itself into two distinct divisions. The first section drew the conclusion that a miracle is a **scientific impossibility**; from what we know about the laws of nature, a miracle simply cannot occur. The second section concluded that any testimony regarding miracles is specious, and never would be compelling enough to override “scientific considerations.” Thus, Hume inveighed that miracles have not occurred, and cannot occur. Brown summarized Hume’s views as follows:

...for the moment it is important to underscore two points. The first is that the main thrust of Hume’s argument was not concerned with the possibility of miracles



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as such, but with the truth-claims of Christianity as a historical religion based on supernatural events. His essay is thus a comment on the debate that had been going on since the time of Locke and the deists—that is, the debate on the question of whether Christianity could be demonstrated to be true by appealing to history, and in particular the historicity of Jesus’ miracles and the resurrection. The second point to be underscored is the precise nature of Hume’s argument. In it everything turns on the testimony of the senses and how such testimony should be evaluated. The first Christians believed ostensibly because they were persuaded by the testimony of their own senses. Belief on the part of the subsequent generations is dependent upon that testimony. On that basis, Hume concludes that the evidence for past alleged events can never be greater than it was for the first eyewitnesses. With the passage of time and the attendant questions and uncertainties as to the veracity of that testimony, there arises a corresponding uncertainty as to the degree of credence that may be placed upon such testimony by a subsequent age, especially ...if that testimony is contradicted by the world view of that later age (p. 80).

There can be no doubt that Hume’s attack upon biblical miracles (and thus the supernatural in any form) had serious consequences upon religion generally, and the Christian religion specifically. Even today, many people refuse to accept Christianity because it allows for, and in the end is dependent upon, miracles. Hume’s writings have provided many of Christianity’s antagonists with ammunition they otherwise might not have had. For Hume, and those who agree with him, **nothing** ever could be strong enough to suggest that a miracle actually had occurred. As Brown went on to note:

...[A]s Hume’s argument proceeds, it becomes clear that no amount of historical evidence, past or present, is allowed to count, because **miracles are judged to be violations of the laws of nature, and as such are by definition impossible** (1984, p. 91, emp. added).

Hume counted the laws of nature as sacrosanct, even being protected from alteration by a (supposed) divine Creator Who had established them originally. Hume, in fact, viewed miracles as “a violation of the laws of nature.” He reasoned, therefore, that since the laws of nature cannot be broken, then miracles never happened. No one ever walked on water. Blind people never

received their sight. And, definitely, no one ever came back to life after being dead. The “laws of nature” were all that mattered.

In many ways, then, Hume became like those today who advocate scientism—the view that if something cannot be verified empirically, then it is not worthy of consideration. The late professor J. Gresham Machen, a conservative scholar who taught at Princeton’s Theological Seminary, described the matter as follows:

Science, it is said, is founded upon the regularity of sequences: it assumes that if certain conditions within the course of nature are given, certain other conditions will always follow. But if there is to be any intrusion of events, which by their very definition are independent of all previous conditions, then, it is said, the regularity of nature upon which science bases itself is broken up. Miracle, in other words, seems to introduce an element of arbitrariness and unaccountability into the course of the world (1923, p. 101).

Christians, of course, absolutely deny that miracles are “arbitrary” in any sense of the word. They are not “inappropriate intrusions” of Deity into nature. Whenever God, or those whom He had empowered to perform miracles, demonstrated miraculous powers, such actions were not carried out “just because.” Miracles never were dubious in regard to their source or their purpose. When a miracle occurred, there was no reasonable doubt about **who** was behind it or **why** it took place. Christ Himself enunciated that principle when He said that His miracles “bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me” (John 5:36).

Nature admittedly (and necessarily) proceeds according to a set of natural laws. The very existence of such laws, however, indicates a Lawgiver. In his 1995 Templeton Prize Address (“Physics and the Mind of God”) delivered in Westminster Abbey, Australian physicist Paul Davies noted:

Now you may think I have written God entirely out of the picture. Who needs a God when the laws of physics can do such a splendid job? But we are bound to return to that burning question: **Where do the laws of physics come from? And why *those* laws rather than some other set?** (1995, emp. and italics added).

Or, as humanist Martin Gardner put it: **“Why are there quantum laws?... There is no escape from the superultimate questions: Why is there something rather than nothing, and why is the something structured the way it is?”** (2000, p. 303, emp. added). Atheistic physicist Paul Ricci admitted that “[e]verything designed has a de-

signer’ is an analytically true statement” (1986, p. 190). British molecular biologist Michael Denton wrote:

...[T]here is no avoiding the conclusion that the world **looks** as if it has been tailored for life; it **appears to have been designed**. All reality **appears** to be a vast, coherent, teleological whole with life and mankind as its purpose and goal (1998, p 387, emp. in orig.).

“Teleological” derives from the Greek *telos*, meaning “purpose.” The laws of nature do indeed reveal intricate regularity, synchronicity, purpose, and yes, even design. And design always demands a designer—which brings me to the next point concerning Hume’s argument.

The Grand Designer—God—is, by definition, **supernatural**. That is to say, He is both outside of the laws of nature, and in charge of those laws. For most people, the main reason they do not believe in miracles is because they do not believe that God exists. A person who believes that the Universe and all living things evolved through natural processes cannot believe in miracles, because he or she thinks that nothing exists except “nature.” Since a miracle is an event that has a **supernatural** explanation, no such event ever could occur in a world where only **natural** forces operate. Once a person denies the greatest miracle of all—creation at the hand of God—then he or she is forced to deny that miracles of any kind can occur.

But if God does exist (and He does!), then miracles no longer can be viewed as impossible. Professor G.H. Clark expressed this point quite well when he wrote:

When...one adopts a view of the world as God’s creation, and when God is regarded as a living, acting, personal Being, the appropriateness of miracles depends upon God’s purposes. In such a theistic world-view, where God desires to have some converse with mankind, the occurrence of miracles is no longer an anomaly (1975, 4:249).

A miracle is defined as an event that defies natural laws and can be accounted for only by a supernatural explanation. For example, walking on a road is not a miracle, but defying the law of gravity and walking on water is. Again, there is nothing outside of natural law about reviving a person by using CPR, but there is something miraculous about raising a person who has been dead for several days. There is nothing at all unreasonable in concluding that the Lawgiver, consistent with His own purposes, might subject natural laws to the workings of **higher** laws.

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David Hume, of course, disagreed. He suggested that even if God exists, miracles still would be impossible, by definition. The key phrase here is “by definition.” Hume insisted that a miracle is impossible because it **breaks the laws of nature**. Then he defined a miracle as something that **breaks the laws of nature**. In other words, **Hume hid his conclusion in his definition** so that, at first glance, his statement “looks right,” but it is not. This argument works only if one accepts Hume’s definition of a miracle—a definition that, conveniently, **guarantees** miracles never happen, but which, as it turns out, is a definition that also is quite **wrong!**

It’s like saying, “Football is the ‘best game in the world’ because it is played with an oblong, leather ball.” How do we “know” football is the “best game in the world”? Because our definition says that the “best game” is one that is played with an oblong, leather ball—and that, conveniently, describes football! So football “must” be the “best game in the world,” “by definition.” But, to employ an appropriate football expression, “time out!” Who’s to say the “best” game is one that is played with an oblong, leather ball? It’s the same with Hume’s argument. Who’s to say that miracles “break natural law”? Do miracles really “break” the laws of nature?

No, they do not. As Creator, God rules over everything, including nature’s laws. To say that God “violates” a law of nature when He performs a miracle makes it sound like God is “doing something wrong.” But God has all authority, which means He can work in His creation any way that He chooses (cf. Ecclesiastes 8:3—the Lord “does whatever He pleases,” NRSV). God certainly **could** perform miracles—because He has the power to do so. And He would **not** be breaking any laws along the way. Miracles are **supernatural**, which means they are above or beyond the normal way that nature works. They are not against nature; they are not **anti-natural** (see Major, 1998a, 1998b).

Natural laws do not apply to God since He is not a natural being. The laws of nature cannot be “broken.” For instance, the First Law of Thermodynamics states that neither matter nor energy can be created or destroyed **in nature**. The two words “in nature” are critically important if the statement of the law is to be worded correctly. Nothing **in nature** can break this law. But since God is not part of nature, such a law does not apply to Him.

To illustrate, think of the Universe as one large room. God established natural laws that apply to everything in that room, and then He locked the door. It is impossible for matter or energy to be created, or destroyed, in that room. Now, suppose God were to unlock the door and put another chair in the room (or take a chair out of the room). Did God then “break” the law He established in the room? No, He did not, since everything in the room

(Universe) still functions according to natural laws, but since God is outside of the room, those laws do not apply to Him.

At times, we may think (incorrectly) that the laws of nature are comparable to the laws of the land, or God’s law. But there is an important difference. When scientists witness the same kind of thing happen routinely in nature under the same conditions, they call it a law. [Scientific laws are defined as “actual regularities in nature”—Hull, 1974, p. 3.] But when governments make a law, they give instructions on what they **want** to happen. It’s the same with God’s holy laws—they were provided so that we can know what **He wants** us to do (or not do, as the case may be). Scientists **discover** laws, but God and governments **make** laws.

Miracles do not violate natural laws because those laws are simply man’s way of describing what happens “normally.” (Or, to say it another way, they describe how God “usually” does things). But natural laws do not tell us what **cannot** happen. Nor do they somehow imply that God Himself **must** do everything “normally.” Again, I repeat: miracles are not natural, but **supernatural**, occurrences. They “go beyond” what we “normally” see in nature around us. Miracles are impossible only in a world with no God (or a non-intervening Deity). Once God’s existence, and His ability to operate in the natural world, are established, it makes perfect sense to conclude that He occasionally would do supernatural things to accomplish His goals. But God is not to be viewed as some kind of “cosmic bandit” who sneaks around “breaking the rules” of nature. Rather, He is the sovereign Creator Who reserves the right to operate whenever and however He sees fit.

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