

A Critical Reading Journal Analysis of The Nature of Miracles

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Miracles do not occur within the natural context of the world. It is easy for someone to see a series of supernatural circumstances and declare them a miracle, but to do so is dangerous if taken at face value alone. David Hume devised his argument against miracles, and his contemporary, Anthony Flew, expounded upon these beliefs. For Christians to be able to defend their faith, they must understand and argue Hume and Flew's approach to miracles. For the sake of this journal, the author will only focus on the defense of the Identification of Miracles.

Definition of a Miracle

For the sake of a comprehensible argument, the first step in defending miracles is to define them in a simple and unbiased manner properly. There are many definitions that could express a miracle, but the author of this work has chosen to use the explanation defined by Douglass Geivett and Gary Habermas in their work *In Defense of Miracles*. A miracle can be understood in their explanation wherein God temporarily suspends the natural order of things to make His actions known or seen¹.

Geivett and Habermas clearly state that a miracle must be temporary, an exception to nature (i.e., supernatural), and be used by God to show His power². Unfortunately, this definition can be hard to argue with a naturalist since accepting the explanation requires believing in God. If not believing in God, at least believing in something supernatural (beyond nature). It is clear that one who does not believe in the potential for anything beyond nature would require an extra

¹ Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 62.

² *Ibid.*, 63

measure of convincing. Therefore, the strongest argument against miracles is that they cannot be identified.

A Strong Case Against Miracles: Identification

As stated previously, the strongest argument against miracles, per the author of this journal, is the difficulty in identifying them. The past several centuries of scientific endeavors have focused a great deal on understanding and illustrating the laws of nature in action. There are things that can be observed in the world every day, and almost all of them can be rationally identified in natural terms. The Earth rotates around the Sun in an orbit because the Sun generally appears in the exact same place at the exact same time each day. Most large bodies of water are created by water flowing from smaller sources (creeks, rivers, glacial drift, etc.) into a larger source such as an ocean because the flow of water can be followed and measured to a natural conclusion. The challenge comes when something does not obey the laws of nature.

For example, someone who has never witnessed a rare event such as a solar eclipse may be inclined to say that the event is not possible³. However, if the same individual mentioned previously witnessed a solar eclipse shortly after saying they were impossible, they would have to rationalize this event somehow. For someone to identify something as a miracle, they must be able to witness something for which there is no readily available explanation. Certainly, the first men to walk upright on the planet to witness a solar eclipse would no doubt respond with terror and/or divine worship. In this instance, the primal observers of that eclipse have gone on to create subsequent generations who are told of the strange “light go dark” instance until one of their far distant offspring eventually realizes that the sun can go dark because the moon can

³ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 99.

move in front of it and cause the eclipse. Now, a previously miraculous occurrence has been explained.

If one follows this line of thinking, it is clear to see why defining something as miraculous upon first witnessing it could cause one to think of it as a miracle only to be proven later that it was a natural occurrence that can be explained by laws that, while previously unknown, are now known. Someone who considers themselves a naturalist, such as Hume, would only believe something miraculous until a natural law can help explain the occurrence. Once this happens, though, the support for a miracle falls apart quickly. What should the Christian do when identifying something as a miracle if this is the case? To this end, the final section of this work now turns.

In Defense of the Identification of Miracles

As this discussion has previously stated, identifying a miracle is challenging, but this author would argue that it is not impossible. The most glaring difficulty in identifying a miracle is its violation of natural law⁴. In the previous example, the ancestors of modern man would not have a method to understand or define an eclipse because their understanding of the natural law was woefully incomplete. Many years beyond those Neanderthal days, the nature of the eclipse can be understood by an expanded understanding of natural law – that is to say, people's understanding of nature has expanded. A naturalist would argue that a miracle is impossible until they can be convinced otherwise, yet if they believe there is no such thing as a miracle, it is nigh impossible to change that thinking – the dice are already loaded in their favor⁵.

⁴ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

A simpler argument would be to someone who believes in miracles and wants proof to identify that they exist. The simplest way to approach this would be to look at one of the miracles in the Bible, such as the two loaves of bread and five fish that were used to feed some 5,000 men (not counting women and children) (cf. Matthew 14:17-21). A naturalist would see that it would be impossible for such a small amount of food to feed such a multitude (and still have leftovers). Yet, to a believer in miracles, there is absolutely no reason this event could not happen because, in their estimation, miracles can and do happen. Furthermore, if one is not only a believer in miracles but also a believer in God, then the explanation that this occurred because it was a miracle from God is a perfectly reasonable explanation⁶. Yet, to comply with Geivett and Habermas's definition of miracles, God must have wanted to use this situation to show Jesus' power.

What, then, could one say to those who do not believe in miracles? An unobtrusive way to answer this question might be that something unusual happened, but how it happened is unknown until a better answer can be found. It would be easy for a believer to argue that since no other explanation exists, the only answer is that it must be from God, but this falls very closely to the "God in the gaps" theory⁷. The hard truth is that every single event (miraculous or otherwise) can have any number of solutions ranging from plausible to ridiculous⁸. It could be argued that the small amount of food could feed so many people because small alien mollusks, unseen to the naked eye, used a heretofore unknown scientific replication method to make copies of the food repeatedly until everyone was fed. Alternatively, it could be argued that when Jesus blessed the

⁶ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 103.

⁷ J C Beall and A J Cotnoir, "God of the gaps: a neglected reply to God's stone problem," *Analysis* 77, no 4 (2017): 681.

⁸ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 108.

food, God allowed a divine suspension of natural law to feed all that have a need (cf. Matthew 14:19-20). In this way, even the miraculous explanation of the event is more plausible than the alternatives offered. The key to this argument is that no matter how plausible both sides of the debate may be, it is highly unlikely that either party can be forced to believe something unless they exhaust all other explanations⁹.

Conclusion

Mankind fears what it cannot understand. Miracles are something that, by their very nature, cannot be understood. The naturalist can be just as happy with the fact that there are things in the universe that cannot yet be understood and are willing to wait until natural science advances enough. The believer can choose to be happy with the fact that something is not understood and, therefore, must be something God chose to happen for His own ends. This author would argue that although identifying a miracle may prove challenging, a miraculous explanation is likely one of the less ridiculous ones until a better solution is available.

⁹ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 110.

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