

A Critical Reading Journal Analysis Evaluating the Miraculous Claims Argument

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As evidenced by the material throughout this course, for the Christian faith to be supported, certain underpinnings must be in place. Foremost in this list, is the importance and place in Christian theism that supports miracles. The Old and New Testaments are saturated with the use of and inclusion in miracles. The very way in which God created the world is a miracle. The way that God led Abraham to the promised land required numerous miracles as did Moses. Of course, the most prominent miracle of all is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – without it, we have nothing (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:14-19). In this week’s readings, the material focuses on the methodology for evaluating miraculous claims and ways to compare Christian miracles with that of other religions.

Christian Evaluation of non-Christian Miracles

The Christian belief of Jesus’s resurrection is the most hotly debated topic among Christians and non-believers because non-believers struggle with understanding how such events could occur. In returning to the initial conversation in Habermas’ book *In Defense of Miracles*, about the naturalistic and theistic views on the world and miracles, we are reminded of the naturalist view of the world as a closed box and that nothing may come from outside of the box into the world. This means, that the beliefs of theists, especially Christian theists, is that our system is ‘supernatural.’ If the religion and belief system of other cultures does not offer any belief in the supernatural, a miracle cannot exist since there is no supernatural way for it to occur¹. Miracles must occur in a supernatural way so religions such as Buddhism which offer no

¹ R Douglas Geivett and Gary R Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Action in History* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 204.

mechanism for miracles cannot support miracles and will likely be a cause for contention in debates with theists.

Another aspect of understanding miracles is to consider the tendency towards myths and legends to support miraculous claims. The farther removed from the original source material a story is, the more likely it is to have been embellished or changed. If one wants to test this hypothesis, they need only convince a group of people (preferably elementary students) to engage in a game of *Telephone*. The premise of the game is that one person whispers a statement such as “the sky is cloudy today” into the ear of another student. From this point on, each person must do their best to repeat what was spoken to them. By the time the last person, say 10 students away from the original, hears the statement and then says it out loud, the statement may be as ridiculous as “The clowns in the sky made Mr. Davis grouchy.” The most common reason for such a strange modification to the original is that someone heard part of the phrase but not the other and added to it.

When one looks at the miraculous statements about Christ, it would be easy to argue that they were embellished by other legends or events found in other religions². This hypothesis does seem sensible at first glance, but the fact that the stories of Christ were passed down in a short period of time between the events themselves and the time in which the stories were recorded complicates this explanation. In the most minimalist sense, the apostles told the story of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection within five years of the events’ occurrence, and this exact message and story was passed down to Paul within this same time³. However, if historical evidence is

² Geivett & Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 206.

³ *Ibid.*, 248.

available to corroborate the miraculous story from another religion, Christians must be willing to give this evidence the same consideration but only if such evidence exists⁴.

Evidence vs. Mythos for Christ's Resurrection

Considering historical evidence, what can the Christian hope to make of the resurrection claim? After all, if a truly miraculous event such as Jesus' bodily resurrection occurred, how can one determine if the claims can be distinct from legendary claims? This premise has already been alleviated to in the previous paragraph – historical evidence. To separate myth from historical evidence, this document will now consider some key aspects of historical materials to support the resurrection.

First, as previously discussed, much of the material from Christ's resurrection was passed from the apostles who witnessed it firsthand, to Paul within five years of the event's occurrence⁵. With so little time passing from when the event occurred and Paul's mention of the events in 1 Corinthians 15:33, not enough time has passed for the story to take on a legendary tone. Paul, a man of reputation and knowledge would also not embellish the story for risk of cheapening it.

Second, the facts surrounding the events of the burial and resurrection contain clear indicators of the mentality of the era. It is not a leap to consider that Joseph of Arimathea was likely a real person and that he gave his tomb to bury Jesus since even the Sanhedrin, of which Joseph was a member, considered Jesus a great rabbi despite his (in Jewish thought) blasphemous claims. The religious elite would not have wanted to see a holy man buried in a criminal's grave and this tracks nicely with the prevailing thought of the era⁶. A grave, at its

⁴ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 210.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

base, is a monument to the memory of a person who is no longer present. If Jesus had been buried in any other way but in a tomb, the people would consider it an affront to what his teachings stood for.

Next, the tale of the resurrection of Jesus is not rife with symbolism or embellishment as would have likely been present if the story was to be considered legendary in its time. In fact, the biblical description of the resurrection in the gospels is not embellished at all – it simply happens (cf. Matthew 28:6). Though some apocryphal works might have taken a legendary or embellished depiction of the events, these were generally written long after the original event and are not considered canonical. Had the writers of Jesus' resurrection wanted to make the story sound more legendary and garner attention of crowds, it would logically follow that they would have added fantastical elements and the welcoming of a hero. Instead, we find an empty tomb, nicely folded grave clothes, and an angel telling women (legends would not have made this mistake since women are considered so much lower than men in the era) that Jesus has risen⁷.

Furthermore, historians have tried to dispel the resurrection of Jesus' by making many claims about the body being stolen after the events, but this does not make sense in the societal framework of the time. In the case of Jewish culture, dead and decaying flesh is considered one of the most unclean things in the Law and no right-thinking Jew would ever be willing to touch a dead body just to dispel a rumor (cf. Leviticus 21:11, Numbers 19:11, & John 19:31). If a non-Jewish thief had wanted to steal Jesus' body, what would their motive be? After all, if he was buried in a tomb with lots of finery, they would steal these items (were they able to roll the stone away). Also, if he had been buried wearing fine clothing with gems or fine threads, it could be argued that a thief might want to steal these items, but Jesus was buried in simple grave clothes

⁷ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 254.

that would have no value to a thief⁸. It also would not make sense for a Roman soldier or aristocrat to steal Jesus' body because there was already enough political unrest between the Jews and the Romans that any such defilement of a corpse would likely have been the proverbial match to light the gasoline of the political climate (cf. Luke 23:1-2) – a foolish move, indeed.

Lastly, one must consider the other argument against the resurrection, the disciples and other people who claimed to see Jesus after his death and resurrection were hallucinating. Once again, had the incidents of the appearance of Jesus been limited to a small group of people, especially those who were present at the crucifixion or with a secondary exposure to it, then this explanation might be defensible. In the modern world, there are plenty of people who will have a dream that they saw someone important from their past and this entity told them to make some drastic changes to their life. This might seem appealing on the surface, but these post-dream changes are generally minor (perhaps someone decides not to eat a certain food or to speak to a person that they are estranged from). However, a hallucination or a dream would not cover such a large group of people (well over 5,000) nor would it cause a non-believer to suddenly be willing to die for their faith⁹. Even if one claims that they saw a “form” that reminded them of Christ and motivated them to change their life, this will still require some supernatural force which naturalists believe is impossible¹⁰.

⁸ Geivett & Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 259.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

Conclusion

Miraculous claims are nothing new in the grand scheme of things. People of bygone years have claimed miraculous things to explain varying events in their lives. In fact, television and movies feature flippant statements of “It’s a miracle!” for something as mundane as a dog returning home or a car being found only a few miles away from a location. These are not miraculous and further reduce the believability of miraculous claims. It makes sense that many people might have a desire to make such a claim for many reasons but if there is no historical evidence of such a claim, there is little beyond personal consideration to validate the miracle. Yet, in the case of Jesus’ death and resurrection, there is simply not enough evidence to argue against the historicity of these events. Whatever one chose to believe, they should not do so blindly. People should seek answers to fill their unbelief. If one seeks answers about the miraculous events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, they will be hard pressed to find defensible and historical reasons not to believe in these events.

Bibliography

Geivett, Douglas, and Gary Habermas. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.