

# Miracles: Introduction

What do theists mean by 'miracle'?

Read the following incidents and examine the use of the word 'miracle' in each.

POLICE monitoring traffic on the M6 were appalled to see a motorist changing a flat tyre. He was carrying out his repair in the overtaking lane of one of the busiest roads in Europe. A police officer said: " Cars coming round the corner could not see him until they were just yards away. It's a miracle no one was seriously injured."

A man interested in old cameras came across one in an antiques shop. He bought it. He discovered that there was still film in the camera, which he had developed. The pictures turned out to be over forty years old. One was a picture of a boy fishing at the river's edge. The boy was none other than he. It seemed a miracle.

## MIRACULOUS RECOVERY FROM MS

THE Bishop of Lourdes has declared the recovery of a 51-year-old sufferer from multiple sclerosis to be inexplicable. The shrine's medical experts have taken almost 12 years to investigate the case of Jean-Pierre Bély, a medical worker from Angoulême, France, who recovered from his severe illness on Oct 9, 1987, the night after receiving "the sacrament of the sick" at the Lourdes shrine.

The Church has dismissed about 6,500 and approved 66 similar cures after lengthy investigation. M Bély, who had suffered from multiple sclerosis since 1972, was wheelchair-bound at the time of his pilgrimage to the shrine. Yesterday, after twelve years of full health, he said the cure was "a warmth which began in my toes and moved slowly up my legs before it invaded every cell in my body". He said: "That night I heard a voice, full of tenderness, telling me to rise up and walk."

The Bishop of Angoulême said the cure was "a personal gift from God to this man". He avoided using the word 'miracle', used by the Church for the actions of Jesus.

**Classical**

## Definitions

### Violation-of-nature definitions

*A miracle is a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity ...*

David Hume, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish Philosopher

*A miracle is a violation of a law of nature by a god, that is, a very powerful rational being who is not a material object ...*

Richard Swinburne, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Oxford Theologian

*A miracle is a violation of a law of nature brought about by divine or supernatural intervention ...*

John Mackie, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philosopher & Theologian

### 'Something beyond nature as we know it' definitions

*Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.*

St Augustine of Hippo, 4<sup>th</sup> Century Bishop and Doctor of the Church

*Those things must be called miraculous which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things ...*

Thomas Aquinas

*A miracle does not necessarily imply a violation of nature ... merely the interposition of an external cause ...*

John Henry Newman, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theologian and Cardinal

## Words used to denote 'miracle' in the Bible

### OT

Hebrew

'nes' or 'oth' – meaning sign

'pala' – beyond the ordinary or expected

'mopeth' – a wonder or portent

### NT

Greek

'ergon' - work

'dynamis' – power, dynamism

'teras' - portent

'semeion' - sign

The English word 'miracle' comes from the Latin word for a wonderful thing or surprise.

## **Some views about miracles**

### **They do not happen ...**

David Hume was a forceful opponent of belief in miracles. One of his arguments can be summarised thus:

- a miracle is a break of a law of nature
- believing in miracles is not rational because we should proportion our belief to the evidence available
- what evidence is available? the past evidence of uniform laws established by 'firm and unalterable experience'
- so no testimony can establish a miracle 'unless the testimony be of such kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous'
- however, we would need utterly reliable, reasonable, truthful and trustworthy witnesses
- Hume notes that this is never the case, as far as he is concerned; stories of miracles derive from ignorant and barbarous places and nations
- in any case, miracle stories from different religions contradict each other, providing, as Hume says, 'a complete triumph for the sceptic'

### **Miracles are not miraculous, but have 'sign value'**

Many recent theologians attempt to revise the miracle stories of scripture; they emphasise that the 'message' rather than what literally happened is what is important. They would also add that miracle accounts would have gone through a process of editing (and perhaps dramatisation).

Bultmann (A Biblical Scholar) - all miracles are "Mythological" - He held that the Biblical miracles were part of a story wrapped up in the "Mythical trappings" of the 1st Century:- Demons, voices from heaven, etc. He set out to remove these trappings and to expose the Historical Christ.

## **Miracles really are miraculous, and continue to be part of Church life**

Christian orthodoxy (orthodoxy = ‘right/proper worship’) holds that the miraculous element persists in Church life.

Though the Latin root of ‘miracle’ means ‘wondrous surprise/marvel’, a miracle in the Judeo-Christian sense is not just an incredible happening. For example, if the pen you are holding suddenly turns into a potato – that would be wondrous, but not a miracle since no divine purpose would be appear to be served.

A study of Jesus’ miracles yields the following:

- *miracles feature as an indispensable part of Jesus’ ministry*
- *they ‘back-up’ his teaching and witness to who he really is*
- *they can be thought of as ‘nature’ and ‘healing’ miracles*
- *faith is an essential prerequisite for many miracles*
- *C.S. Lewis (following Cardinal Newman) believed that the Incarnation was the central miracle for Christianity; all other miracles are as ‘follow-ups’ to this.*
- *the greatest miracle, in Christian understanding, is the resurrection since it literally ends the ‘reign of death’ that grips the world*

### **A new kind of nature?**

The resurrected body of Jesus gives an important insight to what ‘glorified nature’ looks like. The risen Christ is truly ‘in the body’; he breathes, eats, touches and can be touched, shows the marks of his suffering, and so on. And yet he does not appear to be bounded by time, space, barriers, and so forth. Perhaps this gives a clue as to what miracles show – a glimpse of glorified nature, ‘nature as we don’t know it’.

An analogy might be considering what happens when light reaches into the deeps and darks of the sea; this external thing ‘makes impossible things happen’ – algae can grow; coral flourishes; a diverse ecosystem builds up, etc. The analogy is fairly weak, but it might help.

### **Christians might also interpret some events that are not beyond nature as signs of God's intervention.**

- For example, King George VI called the nation to prayer because of the desperate situation of the British forces trapped by the advancing Nazi armies. Poor weather and lack of boat transport made the situation look more desperate. What happened next is almost the stuff of legend. A ‘window in the weather’ brought calm seas, and hundreds of civilian boats were commandeered for the Dunkirk evacuation. The flower of the British Army was saved to fight another day.

## Case Study

*In March 1950, Life Magazine, an American publication, reported that all fifteen members of a church choir in Beatrice, Nebraska came at least ten minutes late for their weekly choir practice scheduled for 7.20 p.m., March 1, 1950. It was just as well they were all late, because the building blew up at 7.25 p.m. that evening. The choir members all had ordinary reasons to explain their delay, but nothing had ever prevented more than a few choir members from being on time previously.*

### Answer the following:

- If the probability of each member being at least 10 min late is no greater than  $1/4$ , what is the probability that all 15 will be late?
- For what reason might some see this as a miraculous deliverance?
- Are there precedents for this 'type of miracle' in scripture?
- What objections could be raised to such an interpretation?
- Would Hume's criticism 'invalidate' this story?

## Some comments on Hume's arguments

Against Hume, the following points could be made:

- Hume's definition of "miracle" depends upon constancy in nature – 'its fixed and unalterable laws'. The development of science, especially of theoretical physics, now goes beyond the simply mechanistic, Newtonian view. Therefore Hume's definition would appear simplistic or even redundant.
- How can Hume be so sure of the limits of nature? A person who lived by a river in the tropics might refuse to believe that it is possible for a river to turn solid.
- One of Hume's attacks is on the credibility of witnesses to miracles. He demands what he feels to be the impossible '*a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves*'.

But the Dominican Philosopher, Brian Davies, makes this point: '*Hume seems to have forgotten about the possibility of corroborating what someone claims to have occurred. But past events sometimes leave physical traces that survive to the present.*'

It should also be pointed out that when respectable newspapers publish miracle stories, they have much to lose in promoting falsehood or inaccuracy.

- Hume's point about miracle accounts in different and incompatible faiths pointing to inconsistency and thus leading to 'a complete triumph for the sceptic' appears to be unsound. (In his own day it was widely assumed that the miracles reported in the New Testament established the truth of Christianity and the absolute falsehood of all other religions.)

First, miracle accounts in different faiths do not necessarily lead to inter-faith conflict. This would only happen where the different miracles imply conflicting truths. For example, if religion A claimed a miracle in which it was revealed there are three Persons in One God, while religion B claimed a miracle showing four Persons in One God, then we have inconsistency. Even so, we may still come to the conclusion that *one* of the miracle accounts may be valid.

- David Hume harnesses awareness of fixed laws of nature as always siding against miracles. But a person's very awareness of fixed laws of nature is the thing that drives him or her to report a situation in which such laws appear broken or overridden. If people were not conscious of fixed laws, they would never report apparent breaches of them.