

Miracles and the Modern Mind

The New Testament contains numerous accounts of miracles—reports of observable events that would have no reasonable explanation according to the laws of nature. In addition to working miracles himself, Jesus also gives his followers the power to work miracles (e.g., Matt. 10:1, 8). Indeed, according to John’s Gospel, Jesus indicates that his followers would do greater works than he has done (John 14:12). The book of Acts especially emphasizes that spectacular miracles were wrought by Jesus’s earliest followers after they were empowered by the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 15:12). The apostle Paul regards the working of miracles as a gift of the spirit (1 Cor. 12:10), claims to have worked miracles (*dynmesin*) himself (Rom. 15:19) and even indicates that the working of miracles should be regarded as a sign that one is truly an apostle (2 Cor. 12:12).

What do modern, educated people make of all this?

After the eighteenth-century movement known as the Enlightenment, it became commonplace for intellectuals to scoff at reports of the miraculous. A motto for historical or scientific investigation became “What can not happen, does not happen,” and belief in the supernatural came to be defined as “superstition.”

Christian theologians tried to salvage the faith through various measures:

- Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1761–1851) developed elaborate rational explanations for most of the miracle stories in the Bible: raisings from the dead were actually arousals from comas or “deliverances from premature burial.”
- Ernst Renan (1823–92) entertained the notion that some of the miracles were hoaxes, staged events to draw attention to Jesus and his message.
- David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) proposed that the miracle stories should be understood as mythological reports, poetic accounts that used symbolic imagery to convey meaning to a primitive audience that lacked the categories for truth that we possess today.

Strauss’s position became a dominant one. For an increasing number of intellectually sophisticated Christians, the miracle stories could be accepted as tales that convey philosophical truth rather than historical or scientific fact. The story of Jesus changing water into wine, for example, signifies the transformative impact that his word has on human lives.

Rudolf Bultmann’s (1884–1976) work in the twentieth century became associated with this mythological understanding of miracles. Bultmann sought to “demythologize” the New Testament stories in

order to uncover the kernel of existential engagement that each story sought to convey. Such demythologizing is necessary, Bultmann maintained, because the modern worldview does not allow for miracles in a literal sense.

John Meier, a contemporary Roman Catholic scholar, reacts sharply to Bultmann's characterization of the "modern worldview." A Gallup poll revealed that in 1989 that about 82 percent of Americans surveyed believed that "even today, miracles are performed by the power of God." Thus, as far as Meier is concerned, "the academic creed of 'no modern person can believe in miracles' should be consigned to the dustbin of empirically falsified hypotheses."¹ The fact is that most people, even the most well-educated people,² including Meier himself, do believe that what are popularly called supernatural events have occurred and, perhaps, still occur. Meier suggests that, if the majority of modern people do not view the world in line with what is called "the modern worldview," the accuracy of the latter label must be questioned.

Craig Keener presses Meier's point with even more urgency, insisting that Bultmann's so-called modern worldview is only relevant for (portions of) Western society. What Keener calls "the majority world perspective" (including, e.g., Africa, India, and Latin America) is quite different. The presumption that educated, intellectual people in the modern world do not believe in miracles is not only incorrect, but also racist. It regards educated, white Europeans as somehow

more “intellectual” or “sophisticated” than the educated people of nonwhite, non-European societies.³

With this background we can now delineate three general stances that twenty-first century theologians have taken with regard to this issue, allowing for some overlap of positions.

Methodological Neutrality

Most theologians regard religious claims concerning the supernatural as matters of faith unlikely to be embraced by those outside the specific faith circle.

Robert L. Webb carefully articulated the principle that undergirds such an attitude. Webb is concerned about how Christian intellectuals can be respected for their work in the public sphere. He proposes that a principle of “methodological naturalism” that allows scientists or historians to set a “definitional limit” for their work that prescind from making judgments based on faith commitments. For example, a Christian historian may believe quite strongly that a specific event was caused by God, but he or she should recognize that the field of historical inquiry does not allow for such an attribution. The limitation is only methodological: the historian is free to believe in divine causation, and should be able to say so without fear of ridicule. But even when the evidence for the occurrence of a miracle is strong, the historian must stop and say that they have gone as far as they can go using historical method: “The event occurred and I know of no natural explanation for it; as a Christian, I

happen to believe it was caused by God, but I recognize that this belief goes beyond the evidence of historical argumentation.”⁴

John Meier (see above) is also a good representative of this position. Despite his just noted reaction against the Bultmannian description of a “modern worldview,” Meier thinks it is unreasonable for a Christian ever to expect anyone who does not share their faith to believe that New Testament miracles (or analogous modern ones) have actually occurred. Whatever meaning Christians derive from the miracle stories (or from testimonies about miraculous occurrences today) must remain “in-house.” Christians who live in a multicultural world should not expect those who do not share their faith to believe such testimonies, nor should they demean anyone for not doing so.

Post-Enlightenment Denial

Some scholars renounce this “no comment” approach regarding supernatural occurrences as a cop-out. Historical science need not be cowed into supposedly objective silence regarding such matters, but has a responsibility to speak. All modern fields of inquiry depend on certain presuppositions regarding what is possible and what is impossible. Since the Enlightenment, the legitimacy of propositions has been evaluated on the basis of logic, reason, and empirical evidence, rather than simply being posited through an appeal to political or religious authorities. The problem with so-called

methodological neutrality is that it prevents scholars from going where the evidence would otherwise require them to go.

For example, some scholars would maintain that it is a historical fact that the early church invented the story about the virgin birth of Jesus near the end of the first century: historians should investigate why such a story was invented and try to determine what purpose it was intended to serve. But a scholar who believes Jesus actually was born to a virgin will not be prompted to ask those questions: even if such a scholar does not claim *as a historian* that the virgin birth happened, the scholar will be restricted from engaging important questions that should interest any post-Enlightenment thinker (who would take for granted that things that are impossible do not occur).

Gerd Lüdemann would be a representative of this position. In two books devoted to examining the New Testament's resurrection stories, he starts with what he believes can be taken for granted: Jesus did not actually rise from the dead. We know this for certain, and can reject it out of hand just as surely as we reject of Mohammed flying around on a winged horse or the Angel Moroni giving Joseph Smith golden plates and a pair of magic spectacles. If we do not face this undeniable historical fact (that Jesus stayed dead), we will not be pressed to investigate the actual sources of all those "resurrection appearance" stories in the New Testament. The significant question is, why did so many people come to believe that

Jesus had risen from the dead (when, obviously, he had not) and to believe this so strongly that they were willing to die for it? Ultimately, Lüdemann maintains that the resurrection appearances all have psychological explanations: for Peter, a subjective vision produced by his overwhelming guilt for having denied Jesus when he was arrested; for Paul, the resolution of an unconscious “Christ complex”; for the five hundred followers mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6, mass hysteria.

John Dominic Crossan tends in this direction as well. He dismisses most accounts of miracles out of hand but does allow that Jesus may have performed exorcisms and healings, since these do not necessarily demand that anything supernatural or scientifically impossible occurred. Crossan thinks Jesus healed people by relieving the negative social connotations attached to their physical condition without altering the condition itself.⁵ We do not know for certain what actually happened, but the cures could probably now be explained from an informed understanding of the interrelationship of mental, emotional, and physiological well-being.

Crossan objects on ethical grounds to Meier’s attempt to believe in supernatural events “as a Christian” without insisting on the occurrence of such events “as a historian.” He wonders what Meier might think of a colleague who took an analogous position regarding Caesar Augustus, whose mother is said to have been impregnated by a serpent in the temple of Apollo. Would Meier regard the person

who believes this really happened as intellectual and sophisticated (as long as this colleague granted it could not be verified historically)? Crossan has no trouble stating his own position “as a historian trying to be ethical”: “I do not accept the divine conception of *either Jesus or Augustus* as factual history.”⁶

Postmodern Openness

A third perspective on how theologians deal with miracle stories allows for a critique of the traditional paradigm for historical or scientific research. In short, some scholars believe it is responsible to challenge the strictures of post-Enlightenment thinking when those strictures do not appear to account for reality. Why should we have to impose a particular vision of reality on the evidence when some of the data do not fit neatly into the resultant grid? If there is substantial evidence that reality is not or has not always been the way post-Enlightenment scientific analysis suggests, then that evidence should be allowed to stand in critical disjuncture with scientific theories or historical reconstructions rather than being arbitrarily dismissed or ignored. This perspective often draws on postmodernism, which questions all forms of absolutism, including the claim that a post-Enlightenment (“modernist”) worldview is to be imposed as normative for intellectual inquiry.

N. T. Wright questions how “scientific” any method can really be if it is not open to having its own presuppositions challenged. “To insist at the beginning of an inquiry . . . that some particular contemporary

worldview is the only possible one . . . is to show that all we want to do is to hear the echo of our own voices.”⁷ He calls for “suspension of judgment,” which is not the same thing as maintaining neutrality: “It is prudent, methodologically, to hold back from too hasty a judgment on what is or is not possible within the space-time universe. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in post-Enlightenment philosophy.”⁸ Further, if the best historical reconstruction of reality and the best post-Enlightenment scientific description of reality are incongruous, that may be a problem. But why should this problem be solved by requiring the historians to fudge their discipline for the sake of the scientists?

Wright, for instance, dismisses as naive the notion that Jesus’s contemporaries were prone to believe in miracles because they did not understand the laws of nature. They did not need modern science to tell them that humans cannot walk on water. They were not stupid. They knew that five pieces of bread were not enough food to feed five thousand people. For Wright, then, the simplest and best explanation for the widespread report that Jesus worked these and other miracles is that “it was more or less true.”⁹ Wright seems to think that educated, sophisticated, and intellectual people of all persuasions can and should affirm this. Even non-Christians need to recognize that the man Jesus who lived on this earth did things that it is not normally possible for any human to do: this is a fact, a significant fact that believers and nonbelievers alike need to consider.

Ben Witherington III also raises this issue pointedly. He sees the suggestion that Jesus may have healed people by manipulating presently unknown natural causes as begging the question of why only explanations that are considered “natural” are to be allowed. Why would Jesus have been the only person of his day to have figured out how to use natural healing principles in such an incredibly effective manner? We are only required to adopt such desperate explanations if we reject out of hand an explanation that is not actually outlandish: there is a God, and this God used Jesus to do things that he could not otherwise have done. Sounding like Wright, he concludes, “In view of how little we know about our universe, do we really know that nothing can happen without a ‘natural’ cause?”¹⁰

Likewise, Graham Twelftree, in his extensive study of Jesus as a miracle worker, maintains that “there is good evidence and grounds for saying that the historical Jesus not only performed miracles but that he was an extraordinarily powerful healer of unparalleled ability and reputation.”¹¹ Twelftree realizes that those who do not believe in the existence of God will not acknowledge that Jesus’s miracles were acts of God but will seek other explanations for them (or simply maintain that they cannot be explained on the basis of current and available knowledge). That’s all right. But to say the miracles didn’t happen is to reject overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Further, he suggests that atheism is itself a religious or philosophical construct and, apart from the imposition of such a construct, almost

any objective investigator would conclude that these miracles occurred.¹²

Craig Keener (mentioned above) offers a sustained critique of what he calls “philosophical naturalism” or “antisupernaturalism” in a two-volume academic tome titled *Miracles*. Keener seeks to dismantle what he thinks is an epistemological bias, the legacy of David Hume’s limitation of history to that which can be understood as occurring in accord with natural law.¹³ Part of Keener’s critique includes detailed documentation of miracles that have occurred throughout the world, which leads him to maintain (as indicated above) that antisupernaturalism is not only a philosophical bias but a distinctively Western one.¹⁴

Spiritual Agnosticism

A fourth approach has been adopted by those who frankly don’t know what to think. They often find comfort in the writings of Marcus Borg, who considered all the views discussed here and basically said, “I don’t know.” Borg was usually regarded (with Crossan and Lüdemann) as a representative of “the religious left,” and he was frequently pitted in debates against folks like Keener, Witherington, and (especially) Wright. Still, he definitely believed in “a world of spirit” that is neither visible nor tangible and so cannot be studied in the same way as the visible world. This world of spirit might correlate with what some would regard as a supernatural realm, but Borg himself considered it an unrecognized or poorly understood part of

nature. Borg believes there is ample evidence throughout world history to indicate such a world exists and that there have been occasional gifted individuals who were somehow more in touch with that world than is typical. Jesus was such a person.

With regard to Jesus's miracles, Borg recognizes that many of them might simply be symbolic stories that were intended to inspire people or to make certain points. The New Testament contains "parables by Jesus," he would say, and also "parables about Jesus": the meaning of both will be lost if taken literally. But, he continues, there is much that we do not know about the nonvisible, nontangible world of spirit and we must admit that power from that world did enable Jesus to walk on water or to resuscitate genuinely dead people.¹⁵ To deny this as (at least) a hypothetical possibility would not be scientific. It is more intellectually honest to admit that there is abundant, seemingly reliable testimony for the occurrence of things that lie beyond our comprehension, and the wisest course is neither to reject nor accept such testimony uncritically. No one knows for sure what can happen, much less what did happen, and it is neither intellectually honest nor critically sophisticated to claim otherwise.

1. John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 520–21.

2. A nonpartisan research study in 2004 of 1,100 medical doctors in the United States found that 73 percent believe miracles sometimes occur. See "Science or Miracle? Holiday Season Survey Reveals Physicians' Views of Faith, Prayer, and Miracles," *Business Wire* (December 20, 2004).

3. Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 211–358.
4. Robert L. Webb, “The Rules of the Game: History and Historical Method in the Context of Faith: The *Via Media* of Methodological Naturalism,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 82.
5. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 319–20, 336–37.
6. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 26–29, citation on 29. He does add that “as a Christian trying to be faithful” he *believes* “God is incarnate in the Jewish peasant poverty of Jesus and not in the Roman imperial power of Augustus” (29).
7. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1996), 187.
8. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 187.
9. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 194. See also 186n160.
10. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 124.
11. Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 345.
12. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 52.
13. Keener, *Miracles*, 107–208.
14. Many of the same points are made, with less detail, in Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 39–90.
15. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 67.

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