

# MIRACLES

THE CREDIBILITY OF  
THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS

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VOLUME 1

CRAIG S. KEENER

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Many other individuals would have supplied helpful information, had I known to contact them; but it is safe to assume that there will be other authors and other books that will treat this issue more fully. For example, from an objective, scientific standpoint, Candy Gunther Brown's forthcoming contributions will undoubtedly continue to fill a large need.

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# Introduction

Despite abundant popular interest in the subject of contemporary miracle claims, I am writing this book to fill a lacuna on an academic level especially for biblical studies. Many academic works have focused on important philosophic, exegetical, and recently historical issues, but at least in my discipline only a few have begun to take into account the relevance of the massive number of miracle claims proliferating around the world. The situation today is far different from when eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume claimed that miracles were contrary to human experience or even when modern reports resembling most miracle stories in the Gospels were unknown to most mid-twentieth-century Gospels scholars.

The book's primary thesis is simply that eyewitnesses do offer miracle claims, a thesis simple enough but one sometimes neglected when some scholars approach accounts in the Gospels. The secondary thesis is that supernatural explanations, while not suitable in every case, should be welcome on the scholarly table along with other explanations often discussed. While addressing some historical and philosophic issues first (chs. 1–6), the heart of the book consists of stories from various parts of the world (chs. 7–12). With a research grant and a year or two to travel, I could have easily collected hundreds of further stories (perhaps to some busy readers' dismay). Some circles whose reports I was exploring invited me to witness their experiences firsthand; while this deeper investigation would have been ideal, my academic schedule and other factors have so far precluded my plan to do so. Though lacking these advantages, I trust that I have nevertheless included enough accounts to expound the book's primary point.

Statistics (cited alongside other evidence in ch. 7) reveal the pervasiveness of miracle claims, but with slightly more concrete accounts I seek to illustrate them to a lavish extent so that readers will have samples of many of the kinds of claims the wider statistics involve. I have included most of the accounts in chapters 7–11 without asking questions of causation, since all of them illustrate the primary point that eyewitnesses can claim miracles. I do so even though I find some of

the accounts more plausible and evidentially compelling for our secondary point than others, and by the end of writing the book I was more convinced of some explanations than when I began it. I thus take the accounts mostly at face value while recounting them, as is common in anthropological and other approaches, and turn to questions of possible interpretations especially in chapters 13–15.

The texture of the healing accounts is therefore at a more popular level than in the chapters involving interpretation, but this pattern fits discussions of popular religion, for which the primary sources are necessarily popular ones. Less academic readers will undoubtedly find the healing accounts later in the book more readable than the earlier chapters addressing comparative and philosophic issues, but given the book's academic purpose, I needed to address those introductory issues first. Others have addressed the philosophic questions far more thoroughly and competently than I have, but I must treat them at least briefly in this book to challenge the modern Western prejudices that many of us bring to non-Western or nonmodern accounts.

I acknowledge up front that my personal interest in writing this book includes challenging the prejudice of Western antsupernaturalist readings of the Gospels and Acts. I believe that antsupernaturalism has reigned as an inflexible Western academic premise long enough and that significant evidence now exists to challenge it. When many Western intellectuals still claim that miracles or any events most readily explained by supernatural causation cannot happen, simply as an unexamined premise, whereas hundreds of millions of people around the world claim to have witnessed just such events, some in indisputably dramatic ways, I believe that genuinely open-minded academicians should reexamine our presuppositions with an open mind. Although claims do not by themselves constitute proof, the world is different from when the views informing our presuppositions against all miracle claims formed. While eyewitness claims do not constitute indisputable proof, they do constitute evidence that may be considered rather than a priori dismissed.<sup>1</sup> I am much more convinced of this perspective now than when I began this book.

Despite conceding the above personal interest, my academic approach in this book is more nuanced, because the question on the academic level is more complex than I have just represented it. I am thus addressing the question of the plausibility of ancient miracle accounts on two levels. As noted above, my primary argument, based on substantial evidence, is that historians should not dismiss the possibility of eyewitness information in the miracle accounts in the Gospels or Acts, since large numbers of eyewitnesses can and do offer miracle claims, many of them quite comparable in character to the early Christian accounts. By the end of the book, I do not expect that any readers will dissent from my argument that vast numbers of eyewitnesses offer significant “paranormal” healing claims. Many scholars writing about early Christian miracles already accept this approach, but I hope that

1. For personal experience as a form of evidence in sociology, see Wuthnow, “Teaching,” 187; legal evidence and historiography also rely heavily on testimony. We address these questions more fully in chs. 5–7 and especially 14–15.

by bringing to the fore a greater abundance of evidence I will help to solidify this consensus more generally among NT scholars.

Before turning to my secondary argument, I should digress momentarily to note that when I use the term “paranormal,” I do not imply any connections with specifically psychic experiences, ghost apparitions, or the like, as many writers popularly do.<sup>2</sup> Instead I employ the term purely in its etymological sense as what differs from the norm of human experience, hence, not “ordinary.”<sup>3</sup> I employ the term at points to avoid prejudicing the question as to whether supernatural or superhuman explanations are in order. I do not employ the term pervasively because for many people it has taken on the narrower connotations rather than the neutral usage I seek to imply. “Extraordinary” would be suitable except we are accustomed to employing that designation in a sometimes ordinary way. A more suitable replacement, which I have sometimes employed, might be “extranormal”: while a neologism is often unhelpful, it at least allows us to shape its usage.

My secondary and more controversial argument, engaging more debated philosophical approaches, is that we should not rule out the possibility of supernatural causation for some of these healing claims. Experts in some disciplines prescind from discussing these issues, which is their right, but this does not prevent other disciplines or scholars from exploring them. Supernatural causation is not the only possible explanation behind all the accounts, and it is a more compelling hypothesis in some cases than in others. Natural and supernatural factors (to use today’s common language) can coexist, but the greater the extent to which a questioner of supernatural causation leaves the burden of proof on the supernatural claim, the smaller the pool of data that remains to support supernatural causation. I nevertheless believe that many readers will be surprised at the nature of some of the more dramatic accounts today. Indeed, despite my original attempts to be “neutral” (and the possibility of remaining so had I restricted the book to merely including claims rather than seeking to explain a few of them), I eventually began arguing a thesis (namely this second one). As the depth of my conviction about genuinely supernatural events grew cumulatively in view of some of the evidence I was finding, the burden of proof shifted so far in my mind that it became disingenuous for me to try to appear to maintain personal neutrality on these points. It will not take a redaction critic to recognize that some parts of the book (e.g., much of ch. 12) reflect a more optimistic approach than others.

Some readers who agree with my first point about eyewitness miracle claims, with which I think disagreement will be difficult, may well demur from the second point that some of these claims are best explained by supernatural causation. I recognize at the outset that some traditional scholars (and perhaps some reviewers) will dismiss the latter claim even without reading or considering the evidence I offer.

2. Greeley, *Sociology*, 8, refers to “psychic, mystic, and contact with the dead experiences,” explicitly excluding connection with supernatural or miracle claims. A glossary links use of the term with terms like “telepathic” or “psychic.” These terms designate particular kinds of paranormal claims, not all kinds.

3. I.e., a dictionary defines it as inexplicable from the perspective of (current) scientific knowledge.

I believe that such a dismissal might actually illustrate the point that an inherited approach, originally appealing to the alleged lack of evidence that could support a contrary approach, is often used to dismiss uncritically and without examination any evidence subsequently offered. Nevertheless, I hope that today's climate is open enough for many scholars to approach the question with a more open mind. I am genuinely interested in both the primary and secondary points, but particular parts of the book will argue one point or the other. To avoid being too repetitious I will not always reiterate which argument I am addressing. Nevertheless, I will note it fairly often (e.g., reminding the reader at various points that I am not yet addressing the question of supernatural causation) to avoid confusing the questions and for the sake of those readers whose interest is drawn to particular parts of the book. Many examples simply illustrate the diversity of global healing claims; those most relevant to my secondary argument appear in chapters 12, 14, and particularly 15.

### **The Origin of This Book**

Whether or not a reader concludes that the current form of this book is intelligently designed, from my historical standpoint it evolved accidentally, starting eight or ten years ago as a footnote in my commentary on Acts. Because some scholars have treated miracle claims in the Gospels and Acts as purely legendary on the premise that such events do not happen, I intended to challenge their instinctive dismissal of the possibility of such claims by referring to a few works that catalogued modern eyewitness claims of miracles. One may agree or disagree with the supernatural element in such claims, but it is extraordinarily naive to pretend that eyewitnesses, including sincere eyewitnesses, do not offer such claims. I intended to cite two or three major collections of such information, which I assumed would be readily accessible and easily located, since I was aware of hundreds of eyewitness miracle claims and cognizant of circles that could supply thousands more.

To my surprise, however, I failed to find many works academically cataloging such claims, and even fewer that offered medical documentation along with the many testimonies.<sup>4</sup> Because I lack medical training, I defer the latter interest to those more qualified to provide it. Those who reject all modern evidence apart from such documentation will need to look mostly to other works produced by those more qualified to offer and evaluate it, and that is an important area where further discussion must turn.<sup>5</sup> Despite the limited sources I found initially, however, I did decide to track down some more eyewitness healing claims that had

4. To my surprise, anthropologists had documented claims of paranormal cures and spirit possession in settings of traditional religion far more fully than theologians or missiologists had explored such claims among Christians. Nevertheless, the rapidly expanding academic focus on Pentecostalism and indigenous non-Western forms of Christianity seems to be effecting a shift, and some anthropologists now include Christian practice (e.g., Turner, *Healers*, 69–74, 105–7, 123, 128).

5. Catholic miracle dossiers have already demanded medical documentation in increasingly rigorous ways in recent centuries (see, e.g., Duffin, *Miracles*), but for reasons addressed later in the book, the usual



been published. Despite my initial embarrassment that many of those claims I first found appeared in popular sources, I eventually recognized that such sources are most comparable to what my historical quest involved: the Gospels and Acts offer popular claims, not medical documentation. Indeed, in the modern sense, medical documentation was impossible; even shrines of Asclepius did not provide the sorts of verification preferred today. Most important, popular sources are the sorts of primary sources that historiography works with when studying popular religion, including studies of people's beliefs about experiences they have construed as supernatural. While I could not reach most of these popular authors to check their own sources, in time far more information than I had initially anticipated came my way. Eventually I uncovered a wealth of eyewitness material and even some sources that offered some medical documentation.

My quest proved so interesting that it grew into one of the longest chapters in my commentary, with sufficient material for a book. (It was not by any means the focus of my commentary, representing perhaps only 3 percent of the manuscript, or 19 percent of the introduction, despite the significant proportion of Acts reporting miracles.) Recognizing that a much wider audience would be interested in this topic than would buy the entire commentary for the sake of that chapter, I began organizing and developing this material into a separate book, improving it and augmenting it with considerable additional material, while deleting a large proportion of the original chapter in the commentary and hundreds of sources from its original bibliography.

The present book would have been useful as part of my recent *Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. But because the present material also proved too large for that book and ranged methodologically significantly beyond it, I have instead designed it as something of a companion sequel to that book.<sup>6</sup> Although miracle stories compose nearly one-third of Mark's Gospel, I could not lay the foundations to address them in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* without distracting attention from the less disputed questions that book addressed. Nevertheless, the issues are related. One of the foundational historic reasons for skepticism about the Gospels' basic content was the radical Enlightenment's rejection of miracle claims, which seemed thoroughly embedded in the Gospel narratives.<sup>7</sup> This book, then, addresses a fundamental historical issue relevant for understanding the Gospels and Acts.

In contrast to my book about the historical Jesus, however, the question of miracles invites further exploration than the questions addressed by traditional historical-critical criteria may provide. By the standard historical criteria used for

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means of medical inquiry prove difficult in addressing the current explosion of healing reports in the Majority World.

6. Keener, *Historical Jesus*. My "sequel" is with a different publisher because so much of this book relates to material in the commentary on Acts then being published by Hendrickson. Baker Academic subsequently acquired a number of titles from Hendrickson, including this book and the Acts commentary.

7. See Kelly, "Miracle," 46; for early examples, note the approaches of Karl Friedrich Bahrdt (summarized in Schweitzer, *Quest*, 39–44; Brown, *Miracles*, 112–13), Karl Heinrich Venturini (summarized in Schweitzer, *Quest*, 44–45), and others in the "rational" phase (in Schweitzer, *Quest*, 27–67).

evaluating Jesus's sayings, we can affirm multiply attested miracles and (more easily) categories of miracles in Jesus's ministry. Most historical Jesus scholars thus concur that people approached Jesus as a healer. Scholars in many other disciplines, however, may ask questions of causation, whereas the culturally shaped parameters of much conventional historical Jesus scholarship bracket from consideration some potential answers (indeed, especially those answers offered by the early Christian writers themselves). Even many historical Jesus scholars who allow that people approached Jesus as a healer doubt many of the particular stories as outside the realm of what happens. Scholars often raise the question of historical analogy: Are the content of the miracle reports, in contrast to merely radical sayings or actions, the kinds of events known to occur?<sup>8</sup> Aside from any theological question of whether Jesus and his first followers may have differed from others, the answer to this analogy question, surprisingly to many of us, is yes. That is, the kinds of miracle claims most frequently attested in the Gospels and Acts are also attested by many eyewitnesses today. Whether any miracle claim represents genuine divine or supernatural activity is a separate question that must be addressed separately, but events such as the immediate recovery of many people after a significant spiritual experience are too well attested to question.

At the same time, this book presupposes the more historiographic treatment of the narrative materials in the Gospels and Acts covered in my book about the historical Jesus. I thus take for granted here the value of these narratives for significant historical reconstruction and do not argue that point, because I have argued it elsewhere. Here I focus more broadly on questions regarding the philosophy of history and social analogies to the sorts of phenomena depicted in the Gospels and Acts. Some scholars who felt comfortable with my *Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, which largely works within already-accepted academic paradigms, will find this work more challenging. I am nevertheless hopeful that this work can provoke open dialogue on some issues that mainstream biblical scholarship has often avoided.

## The Subjects of This Book

As noted above, I address two distinct issues in this book, though I treat only the first of these at significant length. I believe that this book will establish the first issue, a historical one, to most readers' satisfaction, regardless of their philosophic

8. For example, in my paper for the Historical Jesus session at SBL on Nov. 21, 2010 ("Comparative Studies"), I argued (in keeping with my *Historical Jesus* and "Otho") that in light of the character of ancient biographies of recent characters and the nature of disciples preserving tradition, we should expect substantial historical information to be preserved in them. One respondent to my paper gave the expected objection: the Gospels abound in supernatural claims. Once we distinguished reports from interpretation, however, both of us concurred that Jesus was known as a healer, that unusual events occur, and that Majority World reports today should be taken into account. I believe that such an agreement can undercut the objection to eyewitness material in the Gospels, without resolving questions of causation (on which we likely would have disagreed).

assumptions. This first argument is that the miracle reports in the Gospels and Acts are generally plausible historically and need not be incompatible with eyewitness tradition. Similar claims, often from convinced eyewitnesses, circulate widely today, and there are no a priori reasons to doubt that ancient eyewitnesses made analogous claims.

I do not expect this first argument to be particularly controversial, in view of the overwhelming evidence supporting it. Indeed, probably the majority of NT scholars today who focus on the issue of miracle claims do allow that eyewitnesses can attribute dramatic recoveries to supernatural causes. Nevertheless, many other scholars appear to remain unfamiliar with this subject, some still perpetuating the skepticism of an earlier generation on this point. Likewise, few have explored the question in detail, just as I had not, before attempting my “footnote”; I believe that this book will provide more copious documentation for this thesis than Western scholars have usually had conveniently available. Those who demur from my conclusions on my second point should at least find the book useful for its first point, although in the past some scholars have cultivated the habit of ignoring the scholarship of scholars who arrived at conclusions different from their own on any significant point.

The second issue challenges a commonly held worldview, so some of my academic readers may demur here, though I hope they will respect the legitimacy of my argument.<sup>9</sup> This second point is that we are not obligated to begin with the a priori assumption that none of these events could involve intelligent, suprahuman causation. I must digress to point out that I often use the term “supernatural” because that is the modern question usually at issue, but for ancient audiences the question was more typically whether the cause was suprahuman. For Israelites, for example, only God was supernatural; hence, for them the primary issue was divine causation.<sup>10</sup> Yet most ancient audiences, including Jews, Christians, and, later, Muslims, recognized other suprahuman beings in addition to God. Likewise, many cultures today do not accept the Western dichotomy between natural and supernatural.<sup>11</sup> In employing the designation “supernatural,” then, I am deferring to this extent to the terms of the modern debate.

9. I hope that those who are not persuaded will at least appreciate the valiant and academically legitimate nature of my attempt. Worldviews do not crumble easily, although I am convinced that thoroughgoing antisupernaturalism fails to explain the totality of our evidence. I myself value retaining abundant room for methodological naturalism in the appropriate spheres and cases. Happily, the current intellectual climate is in many disciplines much less committed to antisupernaturalism than it was a half-century ago.

10. Some other modern writers employ “supernatural” with the sense “superhuman” (e.g., Fitzgerald, “Miracles,” 49). Some cultures (e.g., in Tibet) lack specific vocabulary for “supernatural” because they treat experiences Westerners would treat as anomalous as simply part of the continuum of nature (McClenon, *Events*, 1).

11. The dichotomy between “natural” and “supernatural” is a modern Western one, imposed on most cultures only externally (see, e.g., Greenfield, *Spirits*, 156; more extensively, Saler, “Supernatural” [esp. 31–32], though he ultimately concludes that the category is a helpful one if employed heuristically [50–51]). Thus, for example, the Mande see spirits as “part of the natural environment, like a waterfall,

Some earlier modern theologians, including Rudolf Bultmann, insisted that “mature” modern people do not believe in miracles and that “no one can or does seriously maintain” such early Christian perspectives.<sup>12</sup> Bultmann, however, unwittingly excluded from the modern world the majority of the world’s population, as I shall illustrate, in a manner that current sensitivities would regard as inexcusably ethnocentric (although there is no reason to believe that he, unlike a scholar I will address later, did this deliberately). Bultmann’s assumptions about miracles have come under increasing criticism from other angles, and I intend to contribute to that criticism. Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) was right to point out, in 1988, that Bultmann’s perspective was not a result of biblical scholarship per se but of a particular philosophic epistemology.<sup>13</sup>

My more important concern in this book is to persuade readers of my first, less controversial point, because this book is meant to be read with my work on historical tradition in the Gospels. The second point, however, a philosophic issue, will be important for readers also concerned with the meaning of what is reported in the Gospels and Acts, since the writers attribute these miracles to divine causation. Cases are argued with varying degrees of certainty, and I concede that my case for the second point cannot be persuasive with the same degree of academic assurance as would be possible if instead those arguing it were medical researchers equipped with extensive medical documentation. As I have emphasized, I am not qualified to contribute expertise in that area. I nevertheless think that, given the general canons of reliability for testimonial evidence, we have a greater degree of assurance regarding many extranormal healing claims than we have for many claims that we widely accept. Although I can understand some demurring on the matter of supernatural causation, as I once did, I am fully convinced that it remains the best explanation in a number of the reports that I will cite. While the evidence for some cases that I have collected is stronger than that for other cases (sometimes due to my own research limitations), I hope that scholars in my discipline will accept supernatural theism (a historic Jewish, Christian, and Islamic approach) as at least one academically acceptable explanatory option rather than presupposing its exclusion.

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a person, or a tree” (McNaughton, *Blacksmiths*, 11). In the view of thinkers like Heim, *Transformation*, 173–99, even miracles are “natural” rather than supernatural, reflecting God’s activity through the natural order but in a special revelatory way. My usage thus defers to common rather than technical usage at this point.

12. “Mythology,” 4; see further *ibid.*, 5–9; cf. Max Weber’s designation of modernity as “disenchanted” (in Remus, *Healer*, 106). Bultmann allows that God acts existentially in ways communicated by mythical language (“Mythology,” 32; “Demythologizing,” 110), but uses the presence of miracles as a criterion of inauthenticity in Jewish texts (Bultmann, *Tradition*, 58). He denies that the historical continuum may be “interrupted” by supernatural interventions (e.g., “Exegesis,” 147; cf. “Demythologizing,” 122; Perrin, *Bultmann*, 86; Thiselton, *Horizons*, 292) and affirms as “myth” whatever involves supernatural forces (Bultmann, “Demythologizing,” 95; cf. “Mythology,” 9; observations on Bultmann’s approach in Perrin, *Bultmann*, 77; Poland, *Criticism*, 11; Richardson, *Age of Science*, 109). For one survey and critique of Bultmann’s approach to miracles, see Hay, “View.”

13. So Jaki, *Miracles and Physics*, 13.

The reader who keeps in mind these two objectives of the book should be able to discern when I am arguing more for one thesis or the other. For purposes of simplicity, it may be noted that I argue especially for the major thesis when recounting or covering miracle claims, especially in chapters 8–12, although I eventually focus on some accounts of more dramatic experiences (especially in chs. 12, 15) for the sake of their value to the second thesis. I argue for the second thesis and against its exclusion from the conversation especially where I challenge philosophic objections to genuinely supernatural causation (e.g., chs. 5–6 and 13–15); the cases I apply most explicitly to the secondary thesis appear in chapter 15. The chapters recounting miracle claims will naturally be easier to read; the philosophic and scientific material is important, however, for considering the secondary question in a Western academic context.

## Limitations

Some points in this section reiterate information offered above, but they bear repetition here because it is important to note the book's limitations explicitly. This book is a prolegomenon to a study of one aspect of miracles in the Gospels and Acts, and not a study of those miracles themselves. Other scholars have analyzed the miracle stories one by one or by category (see, e.g., Leopold Sabourin, John Meier, Gerd Theissen, Paul Achtemeier, or Wendy Cotter, though not sharing with one another identical objectives, approaches, or conclusions).<sup>14</sup> Detailed commentaries on the Gospels and Acts normally treat the individual miracle stories in detail, and I refer the interested reader to such studies. Because I have also treated many of the early Christian miracle stories in my commentaries on Matthew, John, and Acts,<sup>15</sup> I will not distract readers from the central theses of this book by repeating those treatments here. Other writers, many of them cited in my notes, also have approached some of the historical context issues that I treat briefly in my opening chapters.

My concern is to focus instead on the more introductory question of the plausibility of eyewitness miracle reports, not to treat particular examples or even categories in the Gospels and Acts. That is, I am clearing some ground so scholars can address such subjects without many of them feeling compelled to start with the assumption that such reports must be historically inauthentic. The bulk of the book will therefore address the philosophy and history of the question, modern analogies, and so forth rather than NT texts themselves, just as books on NT background, for example, often focus more attention on information other than what is found in

14. Sabourin, *Miracles*; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2; Theissen, *Miracle Stories*; Achtemeier, *Miracle Tradition*; Cotter, *Portrait*; see also Kee, *Miracle* and other works. Also, for various literary approaches, see, e.g., Wire, "Story"; idem, "Structure"; Funk, "Form"; theologically, Polhill, "Perspectives." For an extensive annotated bibliography (albeit from 1977), see Sabourin, *Miracles*, 237–71.

15. Keener, *Matthew*; idem, *John*; idem, *Acts*.

the NT itself. Some readers may feel that any book useful for NT scholarship must focus on NT passages even if it repeats the same ground that others (or the same author) have covered elsewhere. If so, we will have to live with our disagreement. I am seeking to expose most of my readers to more matters that may be new to them, and regard the potential applications to the question of NT reports here as fairly basic and self-evident (though I shall mention them periodically).

While I raise the question of supernatural causation, I am not assuming that is the best explanation for all miracle claims, and even less often the only plausible explanation for them. Some dramatic claims, however, for example, the instantaneous reversal of documented, long-term, organic blindness, do seem to me to welcome such discussion. Scholars writing within particular religious traditions will grant some activities to be extrahuman without necessarily viewing them positive; while I am not opposed in principle to exploring such distinctions, they are not the points at issue here (those points being the plausibility of eyewitness miracle claims and the limits of the inflexibly antisupernaturalist paradigm). Biblical theology is far less interested in the category of “supernatural” than in specifically divine causation, including through natural phenomena, even for some of what it calls signs;<sup>16</sup> the supernatural question addressed in this book is thus one framed in this particular sense more by modern philosophy than by Scripture itself.

That is, my interest in this book is historical and metahistorical and generally does not develop some more traditional theological questions except where they overlap with those disciplines. The question of whether a deity or deities exist and do miracles certainly overlaps deeply with theological interests, but I will not engage most of the more detailed questions. Where scholars offer varying theological opinions on an issue that must be raised but not necessarily resolved, I will sometimes note these opinions without taking a firm position on them myself. I am not minimizing the value of biblical and theological studies on the subject, and I have written with these interests elsewhere. Nevertheless, such studies would constitute a different book and, given my current writing commitments, likely a different author. One theological concern I do have is that no one reading this book thinks that I suppose that spiritual cures happen invariably—they do not, and most of those who supplied testimonies for this book recognize that they do not. Naturally we could fill books with stories where such cures did not happen. I could include there, for example, the eight miscarriages that my wife and I have suffered. But there seems little point in arguing a case that virtually no one

16. For the mid-twentieth-century emphasis on “biblical theology as recital” of divine acts, see, e.g., Wright, *God Who Acts* (e.g., 64), though specifically miraculous features were often construed as of peripheral relevance, in keeping with the academic setting of the interpreters (Wright, “Prologue,” 25). Others have critiqued this movement for sidestepping questions concerning special divine acts in history (distinct from a deity working through natural causes; see the complaint in Dilley, “Act,” 67–73), contending that either modernists are right that God works only through natural processes or the biblical picture of miracles is also correct (ibid., 73–80; cf. Wink, *Transformation*, 31). Miracle stories support the theological claim that God acts only if God in fact acted in the reported miracles (O’Connell, “Miracles,” 55). In Scripture, divine revelation consisted of both word and deed (Mussner, *Miracles*, 5–6).

questions. My interest in miracles is not triumphalistic, as if to play down biblical themes of suffering or justice that some writers contrast with study of miracles. I have addressed these themes elsewhere;<sup>17</sup> they are simply not my focus here. In the theology of the Gospels, signs are foretastes of the kingdom, not its fullness.

There are also theological issues inevitably raised in the book that readers will answer in various ways, for example, healing through apparitions of saints (though I include only a very small proportion of these accounts). My primary interest in such cases is eyewitness claims of extraordinary spiritual cures, more than whether these cases involve saints, angels, God, other spirits, highly unusual natural causes, or a combination of factors. I do not come from a tradition that has ready explanations for such cases, and even if I did, my research into reports does not confer automatic expertise in their theological interpretation. It would be unfair in a book of this academic nature, however, to exclude such claims (especially when medical documentation often does accompany such claims). The subject of spiritual cures is a broad one inviting further exploration than my narrower focus will permit here.

It should go without saying in an academic work that when I make common cause with some authors or fields of study for the purposes at hand, I am not expressing agreement with them on all other points. I do not concur with all the views or methods of all those whose accounts I include, but out of academic fairness wish to avoid excluding significant voices. My exegetical or theological views need not be read between the lines of this book; they appear instead in what I have written on those subjects. It should go equally without saying that when I criticize authors, like Bultmann and those who hold his reticence to affirm visibly supernatural claims, I am not thereby criticizing all their insights or publications. To take an extreme example, when I treat respectfully a shaman's indigenous explanation for an event, the reader should not infer that I would agree with all of the shaman's worldview. In challenging some traditional Western paradigms as inadequate, I am not personally embracing all possible alternative paradigms or dismissing everything that Western academicians, of whom I am one, have argued. On this issue I could make common cause with claimants from various religions and nonreligious perspectives, although I have restricted my examples primarily to the Christian ones I am best connected to locate and best equipped to explore.

Other scholars have approached many remarkable recoveries from a variety of valuable angles, such as the vital contributions of psychoimmunology; while I do not believe that such approaches cover every incident we narrate, I allow that they are instructive in many cases.<sup>18</sup> Because my objectives in this work differ from

17. On suffering, e.g., Keener, *Spirit*, 69–71; idem, *Revelation*, passim; on justice, e.g., Usry and Keener, *Religion*, 83–139. Against some critics' assumptions, writers who address themes like healing or the Spirit need not neglect other ones (see, e.g., Mittelstadt, *Spirit*).

18. I do not personally regard such cases as incompatible with divine causation, though on a general level they would not need to offer evidence for this intelligent causation unless perhaps one argues from design, whether that of divine design more directly or through evolutionary teleology or both, depending

those of most of these scholars' publications, however, I have not chosen to focus as much on this approach, but my approach should not be construed as contradicting it. Each such approach has its legitimate role and its objective.

This book is inevitably only a sample of what could be written on its subject. Further research might offer more controlled studies (helpful especially for the more skeptical); more follow-up interviews with and consulting the medical records of persons claimed by various written sources to be healed; and so forth. Such valuable research requires different kinds of research resources and qualifications than those currently available to me. My discipline is historical study of early Christianity, but this book has required a multidisciplinary approach drawing on, among other disciplines, anthropology, modern church history, and, farthest from my primary competence, the philosophy of science; ideally, this subject could be better addressed with medical expertise, which I have already confessed is beyond my competence.

I also lack the recording equipment (with exceptions in one setting) to meet optimum archival standards for oral history interviews, though I know how to ask necessary questions and am confident that my notes meet the standards traditionally used by many journalists.<sup>19</sup> Others can build on what current writers have done and can press beyond it, as later works should normally do, providing further research than I include here.<sup>20</sup> Ideally such works can provide distinctions along a continuum including verified (to a high degree of probability) to probable to possible to clearly false (deceptive or erroneous) claims.<sup>21</sup> My limitations in these other areas offer another reason why other work on the subject must carry matters beyond where I have been able to carry them.

In addition to those limitations, I have no research team, no research assistants, and no research funds; nor have I had sabbaticals to pursue this research, though I am grateful to my institution for their gracious load reduction and to the library for enormous help, especially in securing my numerous interlibrary loan requests. I do urge others to develop this research further than I have been able to do, and I suspect that doctors working in Majority World hospitals might be most ideally

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on one's interpretive grid. I have not followed the distinction between "healing" and "cure" found in some of these works, not because I find such distinctions illegitimate but because they are less germane to my focus.

19. At least, based on my experiences with interviews with cautious journalists; I am not considering here the less careful interviewers. One journalist whose work I cite several times in this book notes an occasion where, receiving an unexpected source of information, he "took notes on the back of my wedding invitation" (Wakefield, *Miracle*, 85); admittedly, I found myself in a few such situations. If one dismisses interviews on cure experiences as mere "hearsay," while affirming those of journalists and anthropologists on (usually) other topics, it seems not the genre of oral reports but the content of cures (that many construe supernaturally) to which one objects. That is, one is eliminating evidence for a position to which one objects.

20. Missiology dissertations and other works are better suited for such studies than the research of a NT scholar who in this book has often had to stretch beyond his primary areas of competence. We are not accustomed to interviewing live mortal witnesses. Anthropologists have developed religious healing research into a lively field, and research on global Christian healing is rapidly becoming a discipline as well (see Brown, "Afterword," 372).

21. For the importance of degrees of probability in epistemology, see Polanyi, *Knowledge*, 31–32.



situated to develop aspects that I could not. I trust, however, that this work will provide one of the useful foundations for such subsequent research.

The abundance of testimonies demonstrates widespread belief that God does miracles today; many of these will be seen as of ambiguous value in an argument supporting a belief in supernatural causation, but some of them do, I believe, provide compelling support for that thesis, especially where multiple independent witnesses confirm extranormal experiences. Some readers may dismiss all testimony lacking medical documentation; although in some cases medical documentation is available, even medical documentation can be faked or its interpretation disputed, so ultimately any testimony can be discredited if one's skepticism about miracles is thoroughgoing. In some cases, further investigation may weaken the reliability of a few of my sources and my sources' sources; in a larger number of cases, the recoveries that some witnesses attribute to divine intervention also have natural parallels. If one does not, however, simply adopt the ill-formulated arguments of Hume and his successors, I believe that the weight of some of the accounts in this book should invite readers to seriously consider extranormal causation.

Some will dismiss as uncritical any narration of miracle accounts without individual disclaimers. Disclaimers are not needed for the book's primary purpose, however, and I cite only some of the accounts explicitly in support of the second. Moreover, one might ask why openness to the possibility that some events are miraculous is more uncritical than their a priori dismissal. This question seems particularly pertinent for scholars whose dismissal is dogmatic and lacks self-critical reflection about the historical origin and formation of their own beliefs.

A book reflects its own time; the shifting paradigms that make this book possible at this moment will probably eventually make it unnecessary, and other questions about claimed extrahuman activity, including distinguishing the nature of different claims, will become more crucial.<sup>22</sup> When others build on works like this one in more sophisticated ways, the present book may seem basic. But if a book has a time, I believe that now is this book's time. It was initially ready for the original publisher in early 2009, but due to delays in the process (and ultimately its acquisition, along with many of that publisher's other works, by Baker Academic), I have had some additional time to work on it. While my journalistic side was initially not pleased with the various delays (I felt I had an urgent "scoop"), my academic side has concluded that the additional time has made this a stronger, more nuanced, and ultimately more enduring work.

22. That is, modernist rejection of miracle accounts could give way to postmodern equation of the value of all such accounts. On a theological level, such an equation can privilege relativist worldviews (say, polytheistic ones) over exclusivist ones (say, monotheistic ones) simply by presupposing relativism. (Hume, *History of Religion*, 48–51, viewed polytheism as far more tolerant than monotheism; cf. comments about Hume's approach in Smith, "Introduction," 15.) They may also privilege subjective interpretation of personal experience over objective scientific evaluation of the nature of a recovery, a privileging that if applied to medical science could hinder research. That such discussions are not the point of this book does not mean that they will not merit discussion.

Because it is important for the reader to know a writer's perspectives, I reiterate that my current personal conviction is that some of these events do involve suprahuman causation. That has not, however, always been my perspective, and I do not write this book from the assumption that all readers share my perspective. A writer's perspective cannot but influence how she approaches the philosophic question of suprahuman causation, though I think that a theistic bias is not more of a bias than an atheistic one, such as I once held. (Though a small minority of theists demur, the vast majority of theists do affirm at least the possibility of miracles; and being open to such a possibility is hardly more of a bias than being closed to it.) In any case, no one can deny that massive numbers of people today offer miracle claims, however scholars choose to interpret them.

## The Problem

Richard Bauckham has recently offered a compelling argument for considerable eyewitness material in the Gospels.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not one agrees with all his conclusions (I myself am skeptical, for example, that the Gospels often designate the individual sources of their eyewitness tradition),<sup>24</sup> one question that his valuable argument raises is an academic tradition of skepticism toward miracles appearing in genuine eyewitness narrative. Some scholars have simply ruled out miracle reports a priori, an approach that affects one's reading of documents (particularly Mark) in which they dominate many narratives.

Some scholars who grant that the Gospels are biographies or that Acts is a historical monograph containing much accurate historical information nevertheless find the miracle reports in those same narratives problematic. This apparent inconsistency in approach stems not from a change in genre but from philosophic assumptions about what is possible for intelligent people in other cultures and eras to believe that they have seen.<sup>25</sup>

The Gospels and Acts claim that eyewitnesses and participants saw what they and the writers believed were miracles. Some of these claims appear even in material where the narrator claims to be present (Acts 20:9–12; 28:8–9).<sup>26</sup> Scholars can

23. Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*.

24. Cf. some observations in Tuckett, "Review"; Keener, "Review of Bauckham."

25. This is the sort of skepticism noted but not endorsed in Talbert, *Acts*, 248; Achtemeier, *Miracle Tradition*, 136–37; cf. Clark, "Miracles and Law," 23, noting some on a more popular level who simply dismiss the Gospels because of miracle accounts. Others, who grant the reports but question only the early Christian writers' interpretation, work from philosophic assumptions about what is possible that differ from those of early Christians; in practice, they tend to accept reports about healings and exorcisms that they can explain psychosomatically but are more skeptical of, say, the much fewer number of nature miracles and raisings in the Gospels.

26. Most scholars attribute Luke's "we" material to an eyewitness, many to Luke himself; see, e.g., Dupont, *Sources*, 164–65; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 103; Rackham, *Acts*, xv–xvii; Packer, *Acts*, 3; Neil, *Acts*, 22–23; Barclay, *Acts*, 6; Munck, *Acts*, xliii; Thornton, *Zeuge* (as cited in Campbell, *We Passages*, 8); Arrington, *Acts*, xxxii; Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, 66, 82; Fusco, "Sezioni-noi"; Hanson, *Acts*, 21–24; Spencer, *Philip*, 249;

explain most such incidents in either naturalistic or supernatural terms, depending on their assumptions, but reducing them to novelistic flourishes or legendary accretions<sup>27</sup> requires reading them in a manner different from the rest of these works' narratives.<sup>28</sup>

Studying the historical question requires us to examine non-Christian miracle accounts from the Gospels' era. The ancient accounts provide a sort of literary context for how the first audiences of the Gospels and Acts heard such accounts, but on many particular points the analogies are limited, and broader analogies from human experience bring into question the need to postulate direct dependence. We also must take account of the historic context of ancient and modern philosophic skepticism toward miracles, because such contexts shape our cultural a priori toward the accounts, as well as help explain why we often lump all supernatural claims together, when they are often quite diverse. Afterward and at greater length we must confront the question of how modern Western readers can relate to such claims; I will suggest that many other cultures and some religious subcultures within our culture provide better paradigms for a sympathetic reading of the Gospels' claims than our dominant Western academic paradigms do.<sup>29</sup>

Historians in antiquity often include miraculous elements in their works, as earlier in much of ancient Israel's historiography,<sup>30</sup> so acknowledging the presence of such claims does not shift the presumed genre of the Gospels and Acts away from ancient biography or historiography. Yet the Gospels and Acts report signs more often, given the amount of space available, than typical extant historians from their period. Still, they do so in a proportion comparable to certain sections of Israelite narratives, and perhaps with a lower concentration than parts of the Elijah-Elisha cycle.<sup>31</sup>

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Hemer, *Acts in History*, 312–34; Martin, *Foundations*, 2:67–68; Hengel and Schwemer, *Between Damascus and Antioch*, 7; Barnett, *Birth*, 190–92; deSilva, *Introduction*, 299; González, *Acts*, 4; Pao, *Isaianic Exodus*, 22–23. Many scholars do demur, so I refer the reader to the much fuller discussion in Keener, *Acts*, at Acts 16:10.

27. As is usually the case for the nonhistorical, later apocryphal gospels and acts. On the novelistic character of these works, see, e.g., Aune, *Environment*, 151–52; Lalleman, "Apocryphal Acts," 67; Rebenich, "Historical Prose," 307–8; Bauckham, "Acts of Paul"; Keylock, "Distinctness," 210; Krasser, "Reading," 554; Hofmann, "Novels: Christian," 846–48; Perkins, "World."

28. I address the genre and character of these works more generally in my book on research about the historical Jesus and my commentary on Acts. I will not repeat those arguments here, since they are of comparable length to this book. See Keener, *Historical Jesus*, chs. 5–8; idem, *Acts*, introduction, chs. 2–8; "Assumptions"; "Biographies"; cf. also idem, *Matthew*, 8–14, 16–36; idem, *John*, 11–34, 57–65.

29. E.g., Roschke, "Healing," emphasizes that African culture has better foundations for understanding healings and exorcisms than Western culture does. Jenkins, "Reading," 72, notes that "African and Asian readers can identify strongly" with biblical perspectives on healing, apocalyptic, and spiritual realities, which feel more relevant in their contexts than to typical Westerners.

30. See, e.g., Krasser, "Reading," 554; Plümacher, *Geschichte*, 33–84.

31. Our sources do differ some among themselves; for example, Luke-Acts emphasizes signs in a manner more unambiguously positive than the way they appear in Mark or John and as more central than in Paul's letters. The difference in the latter case, however, may be one of genre (see 2 Cor 12:12); thus James clearly expects miracles (Jas 5:14–16), but one would not be aware of this expectation without a single paragraph

While many or most ancient historians mentioned extranormal phenomena, rarely did they dwell on them as the Gospels and Acts do. Yet this difference is likely especially because most other extant historians were writing about political or social events, not the early history of a miracle worker and a “charismatic” movement known in that period for its signs. And, as we will argue, there is little reason to doubt that the first Christians, like some revival movements since that time, believed that signs were occurring among them and that they could offer first-, second-, or thirdhand testimony to such events.

This book addresses especially the general possibility of events such as those narrated in the Gospels and Acts. That is, one may affirm that events like these can occur or even grant that they may sometimes occur supernaturally, but this does not mean that every purported case of an extranormal phenomenon in history happened, still less that it happened supernaturally. I am not trying to resolve every case of a miracle claim in the Gospels and Acts. In principle, oral sources could blur or exaggerate details over time, and even in directly eyewitness material authors presumably shaped the story to sharpen it for literary purposes, as historians normally did with their material. Those wishing to debate such issues must do so passage by passage or based on the general reliability of the tradition, and as already noted, I have engaged both the majority of those accounts and the issue of the tradition’s reliability elsewhere in *Historical Jesus* and more fully in my commentaries on Matthew, John, and Acts.<sup>32</sup> Here, however, I am addressing the larger starting question: Do we need to treat the miracles differently than, that is, as less authentic than, the rest of the narratives in which they occur?

## Closing Comments

As noted above, the main focus of the book is to persuade readers skeptical of NT miracle accounts that such accounts can stem from eyewitnesses and potentially report phenomena that happened. I believe that the evidence in this book, uneven as some of it is, is more than sufficient to sustain this claim. That some superhuman being, such as God, sometimes causes some such phenomena is a theological claim, and while I hope to challenge bias against this claim and demonstrate its plausibility, I assume that some of my readers ready to follow the first (historical) argument may demur at the second (theological) one. I nevertheless offer this argument, as well, in the expectation that a number of readers will find the evidence sufficient to agree and that many others will find it sufficient at least to allow for the possibility or to acknowledge that scholars can make a good case for it. The

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in which he raises the issue. Paul raises the issue more often than James, though over a longer course of letters. Early Christian narratives, however, include more signs (esp. the Gospels; cf. even Rev 11:5–6).

32. Especially Keener, *Acts*, introduction, chs. 2–9; also idem, *Historical Jesus*, passim; idem, *Matthew*, 8–14, 16–36; idem, *John*, 11–34, 57–65.

material I use to illustrate both arguments can also help provide modern readers a more sympathetic way to hear these texts with the wonder with which most of the earliest auditors would have invested them.

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