

Miracles and New Testament Studies: Conclusion

by

James Arlandson

The purpose of the series on miracles has been to keep the door to miracles open. If it is slammed shut before they have a chance to be investigated, then that begs the question always in favor of a closed natural system that excludes the *supernatural*.

The purpose of the previous article (“Do Miracles Happen Today?”) is to explore the reports of miracles in the age of science and technology. The results say that this modern age does not shut the door on them, contrary to the belief of David Friedrich Strauss and Rudolf Bultmann, two prominent New Testament critics who doubt the supernatural “world picture” assumed in the Gospels. They say that the first-century Gospel writers took in too much of their own age that believed naively in a three-story cosmos and miracles and a wonder world. But it seems that the modern scholars absorbed too much skepticism and confidence in a “cause and effect nexus” that “suffers no intrusion” from a divine world. The irony is rich.

This summary article draws some conclusions about the series.

The historical context

New Testament miracles, particularly healings, have increased exponentially today. The Pentecostal Movement surged in the early twentieth century and then gathered even more momentum in the Charismatic Renewal in the last third of the same century, both going strong up to the present day. (This brief synopsis does not include the healing movement in the 1940s and 1950s in America.) This worldwide surge lifts miracles into the realm of observable, verifiable facts. It provides an environment where miracles can flourish. Such miracles are different from a strictly personal experience that no one can verify or that everyone can claim. It may be true that some “miracles” are psychologically induced or deceptively declared as real, but many are indeed genuine; as such, they contradict hyper-skepticism or strong rationalism—at the very least they should make hyper-skeptics and strong rationalists pause a brief moment. What if it’s all true?

Miracles and Hyper-skepticism

Because of the reality of miracles today, much like the ones described in the New Testament, all is not lost in recovering truths in narratives that include supernatural or so-called “mythic” elements, such as the “three-story cosmos” decried by Bultmann. We do not need to sacrifice miracles on the altar of rationalism to truly understand the New Testament. Healing miracles today that resemble those in the New Testament confirm the ancient miracles. For example, if a blind person sees or a lame person walks after prayer in Jesus’ name, then they make the New Testament

healing miracles plausible. The resemblance of the modern healing miracles with the New Testament healing miracles in turn supports the unique miracles of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Certainly they do not disconfirm the unique ones.

Further, if we need to draw timeless lessons from Gospel miracles, then this process of hermeneutics (interpretation) is legitimate, but it does not have to deny the reality of the miracles or a first-century worldview. We do not need to squeeze out the juice of deeper meaning and throw away the peel of “myth.”

However, I do not advocate naïveté in our writings on New Testament history (see my own book *Women, Class, and Society: Models from Luke-Acts* [Hendrickson, 1997] and read a sample chapter). But sometimes New Testament historians can lurch over into hyper-skepticism that pontificates over New Testament miracles. It is one thing to say that the early Christians *claim* or *believe* in the Resurrection, and to leave it at that (even though the historian may not believe this or wishes to remain neutral). But it is quite another to go on for pages on how wrong and gullible they were. This is what Strauss and Bultmann and other like them have done.

Such hyper-rationalism is especially disheartening in theology. Why not have supernatural presuppositions that say that God acts in his world? This is what many theologians enjoy, and they seem to appreciate the intellect and serious investigation into the Biblical text. The God-of-the-gaps, which invokes a divine intervention to answer a difficult or insolvable problem, does not have to rule over critical study. On the other side, neither should anything-but-a-miracle or anything-but-God prevail, particularly in theology and hermeneutics.

It is possible to believe, therefore, in the worldview of Jesus and still be a modern, relevant scholar or average reader of the Bible.

Jesus of History, Christ of Faith?

Who is the “demythologized” Christ of faith and Jesus of history *today*, proclaimed by Strauss, Bultmann, and Jon Meacham? This disjointed person—a human Jesus first and then perhaps the Christ of faith (whoever that is)—is certainly not the one found in the New Testament. Is only his mind resurrected or not? Is he a spirit being of sorts? Is he a cloudy idea of the church’s fictional preaching? If we believe something hard enough, does it thereby become true in fact? Who would want some sort of existential encounter with such a creature as that—coming from my own imagination? I certainly would not stake my entire life and eternal destiny on him or it.

We must be careful about reinterpreting Jesus Christ beyond all recognition, so that he fits into our modern sensibilities. This is especially true when they are built on the shifting sands of new philosophies that pop up from one decade to the next. This is what is happening with a post-modern Jesus and post-modern, post-structural New Testament interpretations. Rather, we should let the inspired text speak to us—just as it is, miracles and all—rather than force our latest trends on to it.

Investigate!

I wrote in the previous article:

It is incumbent on all skeptics to investigate. (The meaning of *skepticism* in original Greek is "to look closely" or "to examine"). Now technology provides a means to firm up the results of the investigation. X-rays reveal abnormalities, and CT scans show cancer, and they can confirm a miraculous healings, as a direct result of prayer. Representatives of science, medical doctors, for example, can be interviewed. A skeptic may follow up on a miracle to find out if the patient was suffering from temporary hysteria, and was not healed after all. I have seen reports on these "temporary miracles," but I have also seen reports that confirm that a miracle was genuine. Next, if completely blind eyes recovering sight can be filmed and verified that there was no "trick photography" or computer generated images, then why would anyone reject such reliable testimony, unless he started off willfully blind? Maybe the skeptic himself would like to attend religious gatherings or church services to investigate. With the leader's permission, maybe he can film a miracle. This would go a long way to eliminate any suspicion. Thus, technology as witness—honestly used—provides a powerful counter to question-begging rejection of *all* testimonies.

D. C. Lewis investigated the Harrogate conference fairly and scientifically. He concludes that miracles happened at the conference. Skeptics have a duty to their name to investigate. Mocking or cavalierly dismissing the list of miracles in "Do Miracles Happen Today?" would be unintellectual and prejudicial. Yet if any of those miracles were proven to be untrue, then others could replace them in the worldwide Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements and other offshoots.

What about us today?

We can experience miracles today. They really do happen. Someone with completely non-functioning eyes can see after prayer in Jesus' name. Just because modern men and women do not witness such miracles does not mean that they do not happen. Modernists need to investigate before passing negative judgment. The age of science does not slam the door shut on miracles; in fact, technology can be used to verify them to the satisfaction of reasonable observers, not hyper-skeptical ones who are too eager to discredit them as miniature Bermuda triangles or as images of Jesus appearing in tortillas.

Since the Gospel miracles happened, the Gospel worldview is confirmed. It is the (bodily) resurrected Jesus Christ whom I encounter in my human existence, through the Spirit of the living God. He shapes and gives my existence purpose—a divine, existential act that is missing in people today, who drift around like icebergs, cold and isolated.

Articles in the series:

1. Miracles and New Testament Studies
2. Hume's Miracle Prison: How They Got Out Alive
3. Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison (1)
4. Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison (2)
5. Do Miracles Happen Today?
6. Miracles and New Testament Studies: Conclusion
7. Bibliography on Miracles

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