

# Faith and Thought

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation  
of the Christian revelation and modern research

Vol. 97

Number 2

Winter 1968

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## Can we recognize a Miracle?

My question is not that of belief but that of knowledge, not whether miracle or a miracle is credible but whether we could know a miracle if we met one. My thesis is that so long as a miracle was defined as a breach of the natural order it was at least theoretically possible to identify an event as one, whereas as soon as the definition ceased to be acceptable the means of recognition to which it lent support also ceased to be admissible. Since it becomes impossible to say what shall count as a miracle the question of credence is not even reached. Neither confidence nor credulity counts for anything if nothing remains to which it may attach. My conclusion is that if faith is to stand it must stand on the proposition that the objects of faith are not discernible but revealed. Miracle is not merely primarily but exclusively a religious category. To attempt to define miracle scientifically is nonsense.

The question may be approached from a number of directions but the route of the answer is always the same.

### *I. Is a miracle logically possible?*

It was once thought possible to identify a miracle as a breach, transgression or suspension of invariant laws of nature. The possibility was parasitic on the doctrine of the *a priori* uniformity of nature. With the overthrow of that dogma a basic method of selection is lost.

Before the rise of modern science candidates could be selected by rule of thumb. Every marvel was *prima facie* a miracle. Anything abnormal qualified in the preliminary sorting. The

scientific outlook reduced all phenomena so the rule of law and miracle came to be defined as a violation or interruption of that rule. A miracle was an exception begging for an exceptional explanation.

This view has at least the merit of furnishing a ready means of identification and that of immediately provoking an explanation viz., that the Law-giver was over-riding or suspending the ordinary operation of his laws. So long as the laws of nature were conceived after the manner of positive enactments, the decrees or statutes of cosmic administration imposed upon events in advance of their occurrence and exacting their obedience prescriptive rather than descriptive, transgressions of the code could be conceived as counter-enactments. On this footing miracles were indicative of God's continuing legislative action.

But the emphasis on prescription bred the doctrine of a necessity laid upon wants, and consequently the dogma of the logical impossibility of miracle. Hume assumed the dogma but was too shrewd to try to prove it. 'A miracle is a visitation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined'. J. S. Mill was more rash and couched the doctrine in explicit terms but begged the question by universal terms like 'invariable' or 'hitherto unvarying'. T. H. Huxley, the agnostic, objected to Hume's definition because, he wrote, it implied that 'that which never has happened never can happen without a violation of the laws of nature', whereas we are never in a position to assert so much. Hume, he thought, cheated by making the impossibility of miracles done by definition. There is no 'must' about 'fact'.

The modern statistical, probabilistic view of scientific laws has overthrown the dogma. Anything may happen. But the loss of certitude is double-edged. We cannot be certain a miracle can never happen but equally we cannot be sure we could spot one if it did. Miracles have lost their distinguishing badges and insignia. An event which does not call for the shoulders of a legion of angels suddenly loses its significance; but more than that, it becomes peculiarly unobtrusive, unnoticed. And the

unknown and unnoticed can evoke neither belief nor disbelief.

## *II. Is a miracle historically feasible?*

This is the same question, in the context now not of scientific knowledge but of historical knowledge. The question extends beyond that of credibility to that of feasibility. Once it has shifted from 'Could it happen?' to 'Did it happen?' there is no stopping at 'What is the evidence?', for immediately the next question bounds into view, 'Is it feasible?' And this makes the problem of recognition that much harder.

There simply are no criteria for dealing with an event unlike any other, unique. We just lack the equipment to digest, absorb, assimilate the totally exceptional into our ordering of experience. The difficulty lies not in the admission of the evidence but in the assessment and evaluation of it. The real problem is to know what would count for an absolutely unique event. We cannot even get an argument for acceptance or rejection off the ground because we do not know what of the evidence available constitutes data, warrants for data, warrants for warrants and so on. Pure logical possibility is merely a pre-condition for the empirical possibility. Non-self-contradiction is not a *prima facie* case for a miracle but only clears the road to the practical question, 'Is this solution to be taken seriously' or 'Is this conclusion, given the evidence, a feasible one?'

My point is not whether miracle is more or less believable but whether it is true that escape from the demand for logical compatibility makes recognition any easier. T. H. Huxley has a telling illustration in his criticism of Hume. If, he says, a person said he saw a piebald horse (let's say now a Red Arrow bus) in Piccadilly I would believe without hesitation; if he said a zebra (shall we say a hovercraft?) I would hesitate and test his previous experience; if he claimed to have seen a centaur (how about a flying saucer or a magic carpet?) I would emphatically decline to credit his statement. Huxley is not returning to a demand for logical possibility. His argument purports to rest on the undogmatic conformity of present with past experience; but its true base is sheer practicality. If something is just not feasible we cannot surmount our doubt or disbelief any more

than we can drink brackish water against the stomach. If that something were an alleged miracle we should be unable to see it because we could not begin to believe what did not make some sort of sense.

We do not question whether, in Huxley's parable, the witness (or the record) is honest or 'telling the truth', but whether he knows what he is talking about.

### *III. Is a miracle theoretically explicable?*

If we cannot assign a cause does it immediately follow that God did it? Or are there other alternatives? My doubt at this point is whether we could distinguish a supernatural from a natural cause assuming we could discriminate the latter.

Our difficulty is that we do not know the limits of human power or the ordinary powers of nature. Even assuming we had some way of labelling the candidates for explanation by reference to supernatural causes we could not take the immediate step of attributing them to acts of God. Miracles don't come already tagged or labelled like ringed birds.

Possible alternative explanations might be that the event under consideration was a highly complex natural event, some kind of uncaused event, an impersonal event (i.e. one attributable to a cause rather than an agent, in effect rather an act), the act of some superhuman but subdivine agent, or sheer surd.

Confidently to attribute an event to the personal intervention of God we need to have some idea of what an act of God would be like in advance of the event. The nearest we can get is to say, 'If I had arranged this I would have done it thus.' But as soon as we start qualifying (to allow for a wider ongoing context) and specifying (to get at the presumed *sine qua non*) we get lost.

### *IV. Is a miracle theologically distinguishable?*

The problem here is finding a yardstick for distinguishing the ordinary and the extraordinary activity of God. If God is acting all the time what is it about a miracle that makes it differ? The problem is the old theological problem of the relation between general and special providence.

We may put it this way. If nature is to be regarded as an organic expression of divine creativity the traditional distinction between general and special providence becomes blurred. Suppose it is legitimate to regard the regularities of nature as analogous to those parts, aspects or functions of the psycho-neural system which not only operate below its threshold of consciousness but also are more primitive than the brain system (breathing, blinking, coughing, etc.); and miracles as superventious like *controlled* breathing, etc. Have we any way of knowing what events are habitual (involuntary) and what deliberate (voluntary) to God? The analogy is a crude one and breaks down on functions such as heartbeat which are not within the control of the subject. But it serves well enough to point the utter impossibility of earmarking miracles by reference to Divine ascription. In order to attribute an action to a person, to hold him responsible in any way for it, one must have some idea already what it is to be a person and to have purposes expressed and executed in action. We have such a concept and we can ascribe actions to persons in an intra-mundane context, but we reach far beyond our ordinary ideas of personhood when we attempt to go beyond the naturalistic description of an event and attribute it to a supra-mundane agency.

#### *V. Is a miracle religiously warrantable?*

Have we a cleaver to sunder genuine from spurious, authentic from inauthentic, authorized from unauthorized miracles?

Many apologists abandoned the attempt to locate miracles theologically by a fix from a preconceived doctrine of God and tried instead to isolate some miracle stories as of especial religious value.

The difficulty is that miracle stories are found both within and outside the Canon, both in the past and in the present. Moreover now miracles are recorded in writings, indistinguishable in form from the general legendary and mythological material of the animistic stage of culture. The old deist jibe was that the miracle stories were a product of priestcraft, invented by custodians of the sacred to hold the gullible in thrall. That theory won't hold water. We now know that the genre is native

to a certain cultural milieu. But now the problem is that if that general cultural background is valid against miracle, if the expectation of finding miracle stories in a certain kind of literature is a *prima facie* case against miracle, is it valid within as well as outside the Canon? And if it is so valid, how do we choose between those within and those without, and, assuming we find reasons for accepting those within in preference to those without, can we go on to discriminate between those within?

Some apologists have sought to erect a religious test of coherence or congruity with previous revelation. Something like this test (congruity with the Torah of Yahweh) is used by the writers of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah who wish to divide true and false prophets. There are difficulties. In the first place the test would have been inapplicable to the first recorded miracle and could only be put into effect once a set had built up. Once membership of the class has grown there arises an interference element in what information theorists call 'noise'. Furthermore no classification of the miracle stories in either the Old or the New Testament is entirely satisfactory. Some – the iron floating on the water, and the fish swallowing a stater – are axiologically problematic. If the class boundary is indeterminate and the membership not uniform or homogeneous, admission to or exclusion from the club becomes problematic. The truth is that this congruity test presupposes an external measure, extrinsic to the category, which authenticates candidates and authorizes admission.

#### *VI. Does miracle produce belief or belief miracle?*

Must we then conclude that miracle is primarily, essentially or exclusively a religious category? That miracles are not evidences of God, or credentials of a prophet, themselves seem to need the testimony of the Spirit.

Locke objected to the usual definition of a miracle current in his time ('an extraordinary operation performable by God alone') on the ground that we lack knowledge both as to the powers of nature and as to other spiritual beings than God. Instead he defined a miracle as 'a sensible operation which, being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his

opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine'. He drew the conclusion that 'it is unavoidable that what is miracle to one will not be to another'. Locke laid stress on the subjective element in miracle as against the objective aspect and the transobjective reference viz., God

What we need is a definition which will take in all three. I propose 'An extraordinary and striking event taken by the believer in God to be a special disclosure of His power and purpose'. By that definition miracle is exclusively a religious category. The fact that an event identified as a miracle may or may not be susceptible of scientific description is not its *differentia*, nor indeed either necessary or unnecessary to its classification. On this footing a miracle is not something we recognize but is given us to see, is revealed to faith. Flesh and blood do not disclose it to us, but our Father in heaven.

This conclusion may well be unpalatable to the Christian apologist who would hope to extract some proof value from the biblical miracles. But it seems to be the only view in record with the biblical view itself.