

MIRACLES: LIABILITY AND ASSET

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But is it true? We have tried to show that theism is true. But is Christianity the true theism? In the next chapters, we will try to make the case that it is. Our goal is to show by the life and miracles of Christ that He is the Son of God. As anyone can immediately tell, this agenda raises many questions, such as whether we can know anything about the historical Christ or whether He did miracles. And, speaking of miracles, there is no point in this entire discussion if we do not, at the outset, settle the question of whether it makes sense for a rational person to believe in miracles. We are operating within the methodology of hypothesis testing. The hypothesis in question for this chapter is that it is possible to know and recognize miracles.

Miracles are a *three-edged sword*, if you can picture such a thing. They are both an asset and a liability; but even as an asset they can become a liability again. Some people say miracles prove the truth of Christianity. Others say they disprove it. If we allow their possibility, we need to contend with the fact that other religions have their miracles, which they believe prove their truth.¹ The following chart tells the story:

Miracles Impossible	Miracles Possible	
liability	<u>other context</u> liability	<u>biblical context</u> asset

There was a time when miracles were considered a major asset to Christian apologetics. Thomas Aquinas referred to the authority of Scripture as "an authority divinely confirmed by miracles."² In this vein someone might say, "Christianity must be true, just look at the miracles!" All of that has changed. With the coming of the Enlightenment and the rise of deism, fewer people believed in miracles. The Christian's claim to miracles became a liability. "Christianity must be false," someone might say. "Just look at the supposed miracles."

A simple argument rehabilitating all miracles is going to be less than helpful. Many religions other than Christianity also claim miracles, and they also use them to support their own truth. For purposes of this study, we are specifically interested in evidence for biblical miracles. Evidence for Buddhist miracles would not necessarily pull the rug out from under us, but it would certainly clutter our argument if we had to live with the fact that they were all valid.³

In fact, throughout this discussion ask yourself the following: How would I respond to the evidence for biblical miracles if it were presented on behalf of another religion? Suddenly you find yourself playing the role of the critic. Look at an example. Why do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus? Many students give me the well-memorized answer: there were eyewitnesses present. Even so, you were not one of the eyewitnesses, and you have not talked to any of them. All you have is their records in a two-thousand-year-old book. Would you accept that kind of evidence for Buddhist miracles?

My point for now is simply to show how complex the issue of miracles is. In later chapters we will look at the factual questions about the historical accuracy of the New Testament and specific miracles, such as the Resurrection. In this chapter we will consider two questions: (1) do miracles happen? and (2) how can we recognize a miracle?

DO MIRACLES HAPPEN?

The problem is not with giving an answer to this question; the problem is with giving an answer that is not simply arbitrary and question-begging. Let us look at the argument from the perspective of someone who rejects all miracles.

Hume's Argument Against Miracles

David Hume (the same one who brought up the criticisms against the teleological argument) contended that no miracles have ever been plausibly known to occur. We will look at his argument in three stages.⁴

1. All knowledge is to some extent a matter of probability. You do not have to buy into a full-fledged skepticism in order to accept this premise. Hume is not saying that no one can know anything. He is saying that no matter what the subject of our knowledge might be, there is always the chance that we might be wrong. In other words, he is not denying the possibility of knowledge; he is including the possibility of error, be it ever so slight.

2. The knowledge with the highest probability is knowledge of the laws of nature. I might wind up being wrong about a good many things, but if I refer to the laws of nature, I am not going to be disappointed. They have never been known to work improperly. Consequently, for all practical purposes, the laws of nature cannot be violated.

3. For any alleged miracle, it is more probable that the supposed witnesses were mistaken than that the laws of nature were violated. Suppose I told you that the last time I was in Washington, D.C., I saw the Washington Monument move over by a foot and then move right back again. Would you believe me?

Probably not. You would try to find some reason why I must have been mistaken. That does not mean that you would question my integrity or accuse me of lying. Buildings do not waltz, so something else must have happened. Maybe my bifocals jiggled.

David Hume applied this approach to any report of an alleged violation of the laws of nature. In each case he wanted you to ask yourself: What is more likely, that a law of nature was actually broken, or that a fallible human being, as sincere as he or she may be, made a mistake? Surely, Hume would submit, it is always more likely that the witnesses were mistaken. We rely on the laws of nature; we expect them to hold. If reasonable people have to choose between a violation of the laws of nature and human error, they will choose the latter as much more probable.

Take for example the Resurrection. Four people reported that a dead man, Jesus, has come back to life, but it is a solid law of nature that dead people stay dead. So we ask ourselves Hume's question: What is more probable, that a corpse was resuscitated or that these four people were sincerely mistaken? The odds have to favor the notion that the four people were wrong. A reasonable person would have to say that no matter how pious and saintly the four witnesses may have been, they could not have been accurate.

Note the subtlety of Hume's argument. He does not say that the Resurrection could not have happened. He says if it had, we could never know it. The same argument would apply to any other alleged miracle. Thus the conclusion of the matter is that for purposes of what we can actually know, we can rule out the occurrence of miracles.

Response to Hume

What appeals to me the most about Hume's argument is its common sense approach to the knowledge we use every day. We expect the laws of nature to hold. I do not expect you to believe that I saw the Washington Monument dance a jig. If I told you I just saw a resurrection, I would want you to be skeptical; in fact, I insist on it. I am allowing you the same degree of incredulity that I reserve for myself. Even so, the problem with Hume's argument is that he absolutizes it, going beyond what can be tolerably accepted.

1. A theistic world view softens the probabilities. We have worked hard at establishing a theistic worldview. There is no reason why we should now have to forget about it. We spent three chapters making a case for theism, first by debunking other worldviews, then by establishing theism, and finally by fortifying it against the problem of evil.

The possibility of miracles should now be set within a theistic worldview. Whether it is possible to know miracles in a non-theistic worldview is relatively uninteresting to us here, though I am inclined to agree with Hume in that case. Other Christian apologists disagree; they believe it is possible to establish the existence of God beginning with the Resurrection. Nevertheless, I am not sure they could ever get around Hume's objection. For our purposes, having clearly established the existence of God, we need not focus on anything but a theistic worldview.

A central tenet of theism is that God is immanent in the world (remember our description at the beginning of chapter 5); God is conceived of as present and active within the world. That idea softens the status of the laws of nature as supposedly inviolable. Our basic experience of nature is still just as uniform and unbending; but we must allow for the fact that there is a higher power behind it, namely the God who created nature with its laws and who is not subject to those laws.

Thus the probabilities may shift. Is it always more likely that the witnesses were mistaken than that a miracle occurred? Not necessarily. Given a theistic universe, if we have reason to suspect that God may have intervened directly, it may be more likely that a miracle occurred. Rather than judging probabilities in advance, the final decision may have to depend on particular cases.

2. Miracles do not violate the laws of nature. It may be helpful at this point to seek to clarify the nature of a miracle. David Hume treated miracles as violations of the laws of nature, but Hume's understanding of what happens in miracles is clumsy and inaccurate.

In some miracles the laws of nature are superseded. When Jesus resurrected Lazarus, turned water into wine, and walked on water, He was defying our laws of science. Our understanding of the world says that such things should not happen, but nothing has been broken or suspended. The normal operation of the laws of nature has been superseded by the act of the Creator who made them.

Let us look at two analogies. You approach a traffic light in your car. It turns red just as you get there. You are about to stop, but there is a policeman in the middle of the intersection waving you through; so you proceed and cross against the light. You did not break any law; nor was the law concerning traffic lights suspended. The authority of the policeman superseded it at that moment.

Here is another analogy. You nimbly leap off the high dive board and in a graceful swan dive proceed downward. There is a law of physics that says that you will continue your downward progress until you either reach the center of the earth or chance upon a solid obstruction and smash to a pulp. (We have a euphemism for this scary reality called the law of gravity.) However, there is water in the pool, and happily the laws of buoyancy supersede the law of gravity; so instead you enter the water, and, after a few moments of submersion, you arc to the surface only to glide smoothly to the edge of the pool. You did not violate the law of gravity; it was not suspended; it was superseded by the laws of buoyancy. In the same way, we ought not to picture the laws of nature as self-contained and autonomous, so that God must break them to do a miracle. They are at all times subordinated to God (remember, He is first cause). Anytime that God wants to, He can manipulate events on the basis of His higher authority.

Some miracles consist of the unexpected configuration of events. Consider the following unlikely story.

At nine o'clock in the morning on Tuesday you have a term paper due. You actually get it done early Monday afternoon and take it across campus to show it to a friend. Unfortunately, a strong wind blows it out of your hands; you see it flutter into the back of a pickup truck speeding along the road on the edge of campus; and it is gone. Your graduation depends on your passing the course, and your passing the course

depends on your having the paper in on time. There is no way you can redo it, so you pray for a miracle. The next morning you walk into the classroom, minus a term paper. The professor sees you, thanks you for dropping off the paper at her house in the morning, and tells you that you got an A. Your graduation is assured. You are left speechless, except to thank the Lord for a miracle.

What actually happened was that your paper traveled on the back of the pickup for a few miles and then fluttered off again. It lay on the sidewalk for a short time; then it was picked up by an eighth-grade boy and his friends on their way home from school. He wanted to make paper airplanes out of it, but his mother told him that he had to do his homework instead because they were going to the circus that night. Your term paper sat on their table for the remainder of the afternoon together with a sports magazine that had just come in the mail that day.

The boy decided to read the magazine on the way to the circus and scooped up your paper along with the magazine. He wound up carrying both into the tent, left your paper on his seat, and it blew into the arena. The elephants came out for late-night rehearsal; one of them stepped on your paper, and it stuck to his foot. It got scraped off right in front of his cage, where it spent most of the night.

When the milkman came into the circus village that morning, he saw the paper on the ground. Since he was a graduate student working his way through school, he was interested in the topic and picked it up. He straightened it out by putting it between two milk bottles and continued his rounds. Because this milkman had not slept for seventy-two hours on account of studying and delivering milk, he had a serious accident right in front of your professor's house. Your term paper got thrown out of the milk truck, and a breeze wafted it right to her front porch, where it nestled gently into the screen door. When your professor got up a little while later, she found your paper there and was impressed by your dedication in having the paper there for her that early.

Everything that happened was in complete accord with natural laws. Nevertheless, I believe you would be entitled to claim a miracle. The miracle consists of the coming together of many small events, each of which has a fairly high probability by itself, so that the chain of events strikes us as improbable. Combine this unlikely chain with the fact that you believe that the Lord carried it out, and you claim a bona fide miracle.

Many biblical miracles are such *configuration miracles*. They do not defy any known physical laws; the miracle consists of the fact that some natural events took place at one particular time in accord with apparent divine agency. An example would be the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites. The Bible tells us exactly what happened in terms of natural causes: an east wind blew the water away right in time for the Israelites to cross; when the Egyptians came, the wind let up, the water came back, and they drowned. The Bible unequivocally considers this one of its central miracles. The fact that these events came together in just this way takes it out of the realm of the natural into the supernatural.

Thus we see the other serious problem with Hume's understanding of miracles. There is not even an inkling of the violation of the laws of nature in these configuration miracles. If Hume tried to set up his scheme of weighing probabilities, there would be nothing to counterbalance the report of the witnesses because nothing occurred that stands in direct contradiction to physical laws. Hume's argument against miracles is unacceptable, not only because it is arbitrary but also because it does not do justice to a proper understanding of what miracles are supposed to be.

HOW CAN WE RECOGNIZE A MIRACLE?

The above observation takes us to the second major point of this chapter. *How can we be sure that this event was a true miracle?* Wouldn't somebody be justified in claiming that, remarkable as such coincidences may be, they are still nothing more than that—namely, purely natural events that just happen to come together in a most astounding way? Could we not say that there is nothing to make us think of it as a miracle? How do we recognize a miracle? Or is that at all possible?

The Critic's Case

A number of writers have argued that from the scientific point of view, there really cannot be such a thing as a miracle.⁵ Antony Flew is one such critic of miracles.⁶ Flew's argument runs like this:

1. The whole idea of modern science is premised on the notion that we can approach nature as governed by uniform laws. If we began with the idea that nature is unpredictable and that the laws work at some times but not at others, there would be no point to science.

2. Science has had a lot of success, but there are still many things that scientists do not yet know. The point is that we go on learning, probing, and experimenting. In the process we come to know more, and at times we have to revise what we thought we knew.

3. An event that we cannot currently explain on the basis of scientific laws may not be considered outside of the realm of science. We simply have not yet advanced enough in science to understand the event. At the heart of science is the assumption that the event is in keeping with some natural law. If you do not share that assumption, you have abandoned science.

4. Science requires us to expect a natural explanation for unusual occurrences. Suppose a dead person came back to life. Water was turned to wine. An iron axe head floated on water. The nature of science demands that you still expect there to be some natural explanation for this event. Such an explanation may be a long time in coming; we may not even have any idea what such an explanation would be like if we had it. If you are being scientific at all, however, you are committed to the idea that there still is a very unusual, but very natural, explanation somewhere within the universe.

5. The essence of science is that there can be no miracles. Divine interventions superseding the laws of nature would eliminate the basic presuppositions of science. Thus we will never be able to recognize a miracle as such. Somewhere there must be a natural explanation lurking in the background.

The Rules of the Game

As persuasive as Flew's argument is, there is something inherently wrong with it. It demands that we play by some unfair rules. It is as though someone told you: "I will play tennis with you. If you make a fault, it's a point for me. And if I make a fault, it's a point for me." In other words, the rules are written in such a way that the person cannot lose.

Christians, in their eagerness to communicate with nonChristians, have often adapted their argumentation to the rules as laid out by the non-Christian. This is commendable, but there comes a time when you have to realize that the non-Christian has boxed you into a corner. He or she has invented rules that are specifically designed to keep you from ever being able to make your case. "We will assume that there can be no God. Now prove to me that there is a God." Or, "Miracles are by definition impossible. Can you prove to me that miracles can happen?" This is fatuous, and there is no reason why we need to observe those strictures.

There is no argument available against the critic who has made up his mind that, by definition or by scientific presumption, miracles cannot occur. That is not the fault of the person who believes in miracles. The critic has decided to cut off dialogue on the issue. Since he or she has already informed us that no argument can possibly count against his or her position, it would be foolish to offer further arguments for miracles.

Science has to have reasonable explanations for phenomena we encounter in nature. We discover regularities, causes, effects, principles, categories. The point is to accumulate knowledge. When a critic like Flew appeals to yet-to-be-discovered, so-far-unheard-of, possibly-beyondall-comprehension laws behind

some apparently miraculous event, he is not being particularly scientific. He is inventing something unknown and obscure as well as unverifiable in order to avoid the supernatural. However, there is nothing natural or scientific about such an explanation.

Even so, many reasonable people are looking for evidence for miracles and are open to the possibility. We can direct our arguments to these people, hoping that these arguments will have something to say to the more severe critics as well.

Again we must not forget theism. When we scan the world to see if we detect a miracle somewhere, we are not looking at pure nature, we are looking at creation, put into place and governed by a Creator. This is not an arbitrary rewriting of the rules in our favor, for, as we already said earlier, we have earned the right to invoke theism. Thus the question becomes: Can we recognize miracles in a theistic context?

Definition and Flexibility

A miracle is an event so unusual that, given all the circumstances, the best explanation is that God intervened directly. We must now use this definition to help us identify a miracle if we should come across one.

Note how unspecific and subjective this definition is. It leaves room for disagreement, but that is precisely a part of the idea. There is no reason why we should be able to have an ironclad rule that in all cases allows us to identify infallibly that a miracle has taken place. Even Christians disagree among each other at times about whether a particular event is a miracle or not. For example, in John 10 we read the story of Jesus' escaping from a crowd of people by walking through their midst. Some commentators consider this event a miracle, but others only see it as Jesus' exercising authority over other people. There is a certain amount of room for interpretation when it comes to deciding which event is a miracle and which is not. Many other events, such as the Resurrection, are more definitely miraculous. .

We have two components to this general definition. First, we see that the event must be highly unusual. As we saw, this unusualness can show up in one of two ways. Either the event appears to defy known physical laws (*the superseding miracle*), or a set of events seems too improbable to come together on the basis of coincidence alone (*the configuration miracle*). Somehow something happens that rational people, in touch with the normal workings of the world, would not have expected to happen.

Second, one would look for some intervention by God in the event. Coincidences and unusual things do happen; so, in order to be called a miracle, the event should be the kind of occurrence in which we might look for God's direct intervention. By "direct intervention" we mean that God is directly responsible for bringing about this unusual event. Christians recognize God's hand in providence (His everyday care for us) as well as in answered prayer, but we may consider God to have answered a prayer even if the answer consists of an otherwise normal event. Only when we are confronted with the "unusual" and see that God's action is the easiest explanation for it are we inclined to call it a miracle.

Not All Explanations Are Created Equal

All of the above sounds fairly arbitrary. One person looks at an event and says it is a miracle; another person looks at the same event and says it is not. Who is to say who is right? How can we recognize miracles on such a subjective basis?

I already conceded that there is some room for disagreement, but saying that much is a far cry from the notion that either option is equally as good an explanation for an event. Sometimes one explanation is clearly better than another.

Suppose that I am sitting in my office trying to concentrate on my writing. I notice my old gray floppy hat on the coat hook at the far end of the wall. How did it get there? Several explanations are possible:

- a. I wore the hat to school this morning and hung it up when I entered my office.
- b. I left my hat home this morning, but my wife, figuring I might need it later, drove out to bring it to me.
- c. Last night a burglar stole my hat, repented of his deed, and hung it up in my office while I was not looking.
- d. The dean of the university, in an effort to convince the board of trustees of the impoverished state of the faculty, sent an associate dean to my house to pick up my hat and put it on display in full view in my office.
- e. The Hindu god Shiva, who delights in playing pranks, miraculously transported my hat from my home to the office.
- f. A group of extraterrestrial invaders mistook my hat for a hostile life-form and hung it on the hook to die a slow and painful death.
- g. The object I am perceiving is not my hat at all but a clever hologram produced by some unknown fiend.
- h. Who knows? The imagination has no limits.

Are all of these explanations equally likely? Of course not. The point is to show that different explanations have a very differing degree of likelihood. How we assess the probabilities depends on the circumstances, our knowledge of the world, and a dose of plain common sense. There is no formula to assess it, but none is needed.

Given my normal routine, (a) is by far the most likely. If I knew for sure that I could not have worn that hat to school (perhaps because I still had another one on my head) (b), (c), or (d) would become possibilities. For each of those cases I would want to have some more information before they become probable. (My wife and I agree that of these three, (b) is the least likely.)

I am not going to give (e), (f), or (g) a whole lot more thought. They are completely extraneous to my understanding of the world, and I have no evidence to reconsider that understanding. To accord those options any probability would demand, not only that the circumstances be drastically different, but also that they would have to be so different as to induce me to alter my worldview.

Thus we see that we would think in terms of a *reasonable presumption*. When confronted with alternative explanations, we immediately favor one over the others. It is the one most congenial to our understanding of the circumstances and expectations. Reasonable people can still disagree over which is the reasonable presumption, but it is not arbitrary. It cannot be decided on in advance of knowing the full story.

An Important Example

Now consider the following set of circumstances. Around the time of the Roman occupation of Palestine, there lived a very unusual man. Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that the historical records we have about Him are accurate. Then we see that this man taught about the God of theism, saw Himself as the agent of God, even as God Himself. He described all of His works as the work of God. In God's name He healed sick people, blind people, and others who were afflicted in various ways. He turned water into wine, fed thousands of people with five loaves of bread, raised people from death, predicted His own death and resurrection, which then occurred in accord with His predictions.

It is conceivable that all of this was coincidence. We cannot at this point in the book rule out the possibility that maybe some as-yet-unheard-of, unknown, natural law was at work. Is this the reasonable presumption? Everything in the accounts of the circumstances as we have them is geared in the direction of one presumption: that these are miracles occurring in a theistic context. Maybe that presumption will turn out to be wrong, but to rule it out a priori without considering the evidence is not the reasonable presumption. How far will a critic go in order to protect his presupposition?

Why, then, am I closed to the possibility that Shiva deposited my hat in my office? There is nothing in that statement to make it a reasonable presumption for me. I have no reason to adopt a worldview centered around Shiva. The circumstances do not point to Shiva as the agent in any other way. If those conditions were met, I might have to consider the possibility more closely. In fact, if I were even a little more open to the possibility of Shiva's existence, and if I were in a Hindu temple observing a Brahmin performing miracles in the name of Shiva before my very eyes, Shiva's agency would become a far more reasonable presumption. I am convinced that it would turn out to be false on further inspection, but I would be unreasonable if I would not bother considering it.

THE BALANCE SHEET

How do we recognize a miracle? The circumstances must be highly unusual and set up in such a way that the most reasonable presumption becomes divine intervention. Thus the hypothesis for this chapter stands: *it is possible to know and recognize miracles*. With this conclusion we have made some gains, but we have incurred further liabilities.

The Gains

Miracles are possible; miracles are knowable; miracles are recognizable. Given a theistic worldview, Hume's argument loses its absolute force. Given an approach based on reasonable presumption, Flew's argument is shown to be an exercise in pure circularity. Thus the main two concerns of this chapter are answered.

The Liabilities

Looking backwards, I would not have much hope for this line of argumentation apart from an acknowledgment of theism. Most debates about miracles are beside the point. When someone has shut the door absolutely to every possibility of the supernatural, as unreasonable as such a foreclosure may be, it makes little sense to debate a particular miracle with him or her. The discussion needs to go back to the topic of theism. Why is theism true and why are other worldviews false? Unless there is openness to the possibility of divine intervention, a case for divine intervention in a particular instance cannot succeed.

Looking ahead, the issue becomes one of evidence. For any given claim, are the circumstances such that the reasonable presumption is divine intervention? After we investigated the claim, is the most reasonable conclusion that a miracle did occur? It comes down to cases. We have to reckon with the theoretical possibility that despite our openness to the possibility of miracles, no particular miracle can be verified in reality.

Since we are interested in biblical miracles, the liability becomes even greater. The only way we can examine these miracles is to concern ourselves with events that happened two thousand years ago.

¹A thorough study that will be of value throughout this chapter is Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

²Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)*, vol. 1, ch. 9, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1955), 77.

³Of course miracles done in a Buddhist context do not prove that Buddhism is true. In the same way we are

not simply going to point to miracles in a Christian context and say that Christianity is therefore true.

⁴David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, Library of Liberal Arts, 1955), 117-41.

⁵E.G. Patrick Nowell-Smith, "Miracles," in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM, 1955).

⁶Antony Flew, "Miracles," in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 348-49.

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