

THE GOSPEL MIRACLES – THEIR NATURE AND APOLOGETIC VALUE

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Carnell has correctly analyzed the present secular attitude toward the miraculous when he states that ". . .the conflict between Christianity and the scientific method shows itself no more perspicuously than in the latter's unequivocal, uncompromising judgment against the possibility of miracles."¹ The problem is not simply related to individual miracles. The controversy is with the whole principle of the possibility of the supernatural.

The purpose of this study is not to attempt a solution to every problem raised by the critic. Even if this could be done, it would not necessarily demand the faith of the unbelieving sinner. The Bible does however record the occurrence of many miracles and intends that they be recognized as an evidence of supernatural revelation. The purpose of this article is to discover the true nature of the Biblical miracles and to find what evidential value was intended in their occurrence. The study will attempt to find what positive self-authentication can be found in the Scriptures themselves where miracles are included in the revelation.

Because of the vastness of the subject and the limitations of this article, references will be confined largely to the miracles recorded in the Gospels.

Before proceeding to the burden of the study, two matters must be briefly discussed.

The Meaning of the Word "Miracle"

The word "miracle," from the Latin word miraculum, is so translated in the New Testament of the Authorized Version from two Greek words. On twenty-two occasions the word sēmeion is translated "miracle." This designation is employed to show that the supernatural event was a sign of divine authority. On eight occasions the word dunamis is translated "miracle" and the emphasis is here on the inherent ability of the agent. Frequently, supernatural events are also described as "wonders" through the use of the Greek words teras and thauma.

From the vocabulary of Scripture it can be observed that miracles are to be distinguished from works of providence, which are wrought through secondary causes, and from mere exotic occurrences of a "Believe It or Not" nature which fail to be "signs" teaching a lesson.

Buswell's definition of a Biblical miracle is concise but comprehensive:

A miracle is (1) an extraordinary event, inexplicable in terms of ordinary natural forces, (2) an event which causes the observers to postulate a super-human personal cause, and (3) an event which constitutes evidence (a "sign") of implications much wider than the event itself.²

While further discussion relating to the nature of miracles will follow, the preceding definition will connote the author's use of the word "miracle" in general usage.

The Historical Evidence for the Gospel Miracles

If the New Testament documents are accurate in their historical record, there can be little question about the historical evidence for the miracles. It is for this reason that those who question the validity of miracles must also deny the accuracy of the record. Van Til, making reference to Barth, demonstrates how the denial of miracle relates to the denial of history.

In a sermon of Matthew 14:22-23, he [Barth] treats of Jesus' walking on the water to meet his frightened disciples. The same miracle that took place then for the disciples, he argues, now takes place for us. Are we to say to ourselves that this is an event in the past? No indeed! The same Jesus comes to us now and in the same way that he did then, namely, through a storm. Barth does not say that the physical event spoken of did not take place, but in his exposition it has no unique position.³

Bultmann is more radical in his denial of the historical record. He believes that Hellenistic miracles can be found everywhere. He does not doubt that Jesus performed deeds which both in His eyes and in those of His contemporaries were "miracles," but most of the accounts of miracles in the Gospels are the distillation of legends or at least have a legendary trimming. The course of their history in tradition was one in which the motives changed, and variants and exaggerations occurred.⁴

What Bultmann has attempted to do is to separate the "real" history of Jesus from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. If this can be done, the miraculous aspects can be relegated to the "legendary trimming" found in the Gospels. To all such attempts at denying the miraculous, Machen's words of a past generation are still apropos:

The plain fact is that this "quest of the historical Jesus," as it has been called--this effort to take the miracles out of the Gospels--has proved to be a colossal failure. It is being increasingly recognized as being a failure even by the skeptical historians themselves. The supernatural is found to be far more deeply rooted in the Gospel account of Jesus than was formerly supposed.⁵

In a similar statement Machen affirms:

The outstanding result of a hundred years of effort to separate the natural from the supernatural in the early Christian view of Jesus is that the thing cannot be done. The two are inseparable. The very earliest Christian account of Jesus is found to be supernaturalistic to the core.⁶

Accepting the Biblical record as reliable and the description of the miracles as authentic, a study of the nature and evidential value of the miracles may now be pursued.

THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL MIRACLES

The word "miracle" in modern usage has received so many connotations that its meaning has become almost ambiguous. When the meaning is broadened so that every unusual happening is a "miracle," the Gospel miracles lose their distinctiveness. When the meaning is narrowed by antinaturalistic scientism, Biblical miracles become impossible. The miracles of the Gospels will not allow for either explanation.

The Gospel Miracles and Pagan Similarities

Saintyves, as quoted by Van Der Loos, states:

Comparative religion reveals that belief in miracles is universal. In every religion we find miracles resembling those of Judaism, Christianity and Catholicism. They are all acts through faith and for faith, with the sole difference that they relate to varied deities.⁷

The implication of the above statement is that because there are certain similarities to be found in all miracle accounts, we must conclude they are all also of the same nature.

A study of the miracles reveals that the New Testament accounts do have much in common with the pagan stories, both in material and in form. One can expect such similarities where there is a logical literary consequence of a certain situation. The question to be answered however is: Do the accounts of miracles in the New Testament and the pagan miracle stories resemble one another so closely that the conclusion must be reached that there is not only analogy of form but also a real dependence?⁸

The evidence from the Gospels presents a negative answer. It is the differences that are significant.

Van Der Loos, in answer to Saintyves, is careful to observe that the New Testament miracles have nothing to do with sorcery or magic. They happen by the Word of Jesus or His disciples. The stress falls on the necessity of faith for Jesus blinds man to His person. The place occupied by miracles in the whole of the proclamation of the gospel must always be borne

in mind.⁹ Form, style and type, which are common to both pagan and Christian miracles, do not go much farther than to point to analogies. One must explain the origin and existence of miracles from their own environment and situation. The nature of the Gospel miracles is different.

The Gospel Miracles and Psychosomatic Healings

In an effort to deny the supernatural nature of the Gospel miracles, many have sought to give "natural" explanations for them. It has been fashionable, in particular, to explain the miraculous healings in terms of psychosomatic response. Thus Ritschl has stated: "Miracle" is the religious name for an event which awakens in us a powerful impression of the help of God, but is not to be held as interfering with the scientific doctrine of the unbroken connection of nature.¹⁰

Schleiermacher likewise asserts Christ was able to deliver people from their sufferings by virtue of His moral purity, that is to say, His great spiritual powers and His dominating will acted on a depressed will, something which our experience allows us to understand.¹¹

It is not denied that many physical ailments have a psychosomatic base. Often when the mental condition is corrected, the physical condition rights itself. Little notes, "Some medical authorities estimate that upwards of eighty percent of the illnesses in our pressurized society are psychosomatic."¹²

A closer look at the Gospel miracles, however, shows that a psychosomatic explanation will not suffice. The resurrection of Lazarus from the dead (John 11) certainly involves a supernatural outside force. The various cleansings from leprosy are out of the psychosomatic category. The man born blind (John 9) needed more than the comfort of a "depressed will."

Exponents of the above view should also be made aware of the implications of their theories. If miracles are to be denied or "reinterpreted" because they interfere with nature's laws, Christianity has little to offer. If Jesus could not raise the dead or cleanse the leper, what comfort is there for a human race that knows the reality of death and disease? Jesus becomes a mere man and faith in Him nothing more than a delusion. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (I Cor. 15:19).

The Gospel Miracles and Natural Law

For those who have a mechanically conceived world-view, miracles are considered impossible. They are a transgression of the laws of nature in a world-view that will not allow for outside interference. Christians have reacted to this denial of miracle with various answers.

Some suggest that it is misrepresentative to define miracles as a "transgression" of the laws of nature. Miracles, they say, simply employ a "higher" natural law, which at present is unknown to us. Thus Carnell states: ". . .since laws yet unknown and unplotted may be called

into account for some areas of experience which have not yet been mastered, they may be called in to explain all."¹³

Carnell has silenced the critic with this answer, but in the process he has also destroyed the very point he has set out to make. Little has well observed in relation to this issue,

A "law," in the modern scientific sense, is that which is regular and acts uniformly. To say that a miracle is a result of a higher "law," then, is to use the term in a way that is different from its customary usage and meaning.¹⁴

If miracles are the result of a higher law, scientists may yet discover this law. The Gospel miracles would then not be unique. They would simply be the evidence of a superior intelligence or prior discovery. They would not evidence the power of a sovereign God.

To say that miracles are not simply the employment of a higher natural law, however, is not to say they are a "transgression" of natural law. They are rather acts of creation--sovereign, transcendent acts of God's supernatural power. They may involve an interference with nature, but they do not contradict nature. Gerstner explains, ". . .the argument for miracle rests on the regularity of nature generally. There is no such thing as supernatural events except as they are seen in relation to the natural."¹⁵

Indeed, the Gospel miracles show a wonderful harmony of miracle with natural law. This is as it would be expected from the Maker of natural law. Explaining this harmony Lewis states:

If events ever come from beyond Nature altogether, she will be no more incommoded by them. Be sure she will rush to the point where she is invaded, as the defensive forces rush to a cut in our finger, and there hasten to accommodate the newcomer. The moment it enters her realm it obeys all her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. The divine act of miracle is not an act of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern.¹⁶

The Gospel miracles, thus, are neither incompatible with natural law nor subject to the limitations of natural law. They are the works of the creator and sustainer of nature and an evidence of His sovereign will over nature and her laws.

The Gospel Miracles and Divine Providence

A subtle denial of the true nature of the Gospel miracles is to be found in the theology of immanence. The reasoning is as follows: What we call miracles are in the New Testament called "signs" and "wonders." But are not other events which we call non-miraculous or natural also viewed as signs and wonders in the Bible? In the Biblical view is not God behind

everything, the usual and the unusual, the common and the strange, and is He not behind them equally? If God is the soul of history are not all miracles simply natural events seen through consecrated eyes?

Pious as this view may sound, it fails to do justice to the Biblical record and becomes a denial of the miracles of Scripture.

It is true that God's providential care is evident in all the world. Nature is no stranger to his hand. It is governed by laws ordained by Him and thereby provides us with a determinate universe. But to apply the word "miracle" as it is used in the Biblical sense to all acts of God's providence is to deny nature its reality. Such a universe would make science impossible.

The Biblical miracles are clearly an interference with the existing laws of nature. To identify them with providence generally is also to deny their meaning.

The Gospel Miracles and Jesus Christ

Jesus fully recognized the existence and function of the laws of nature. To deny them would have involved a denial of his own creative power (John 1:3). His life was lived amid the function of natural law. Because a lack of food produces hunger, Jesus hungered (Matt. 4:2); atmospheric forces which created a stormy sea, involved his comfort as well. The relationship between Jesus Christ and natural law is best seen when we recognize He was not "against" natural law but sovereign "over" it.

Two things may be noted about the relationship of Jesus to the Gospel miracles which He performed.

First, with Van Der Loos, we observe that ". . .one point on which the Evangelists are unanimous is that Jesus acted with 'power.'"¹⁷ Luke states that ". . .Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee. . ." (Luke 4:14). And further, "they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What a word is this! For with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they come out" (Luke 4:36). Clearly Jesus' miracles evidence the interference of supernatural power with an environment governed by natural law.

Second, we observe, ". . .the aim of Jesus' miracles was in all cases the salvation of mankind."¹⁸ This means that Jesus did not perform a single punitive miracle. Thus, when the disciples wished to call fire from heaven upon Jesus' enemies, he rebuked them and said, "the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56). It is not unlikely that even John the Baptist expected punitive miracles. His question, "Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3), may well have been asked because he expected Jesus to baptize also "with fire" (Matt. 3:11-12).

Thus the true nature of the Gospel miracles must be seen in relation to the person and mission of Jesus Christ. In Him are found their source, their purpose and their impact.

THE EVIDENTIAL VALUE OF THE GOSPEL MIRACLES

Everyone who reads the Gospels must be struck by the fact that the Jewish leaders do not seem to be in the least affected by the miracles of Jesus. It is not because they know of Jesus' miracles only through hearsay, for they were often eyewitnesses to them (Matt. 9:1-8).

The same indifference can also be observed by the populace. After the five thousand were fed Jesus said to those who sought Him, "Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled" (John 6:26).

If miracles could not demand the faith of those who saw them, should we expect them to do so of people today? What is the evidential value of the Gospel miracles? Will they command the intellectual man's assent? These and similar questions now receive our attention.

The Validity of Scriptural Testimony

It is necessary to recognize the validity of the historical record before proceeding to the evidential value of miracles. It must be made clear that the miracle accounts are not a matter of myth or folklore but are accounts of real happenings. Their evidential value depends upon this.

Ramm has listed several reasons for belief in the historical reliability of the miracles.

First, there were many miracles performed before the public eye. No effort is made to suppress investigation.¹⁹

Second, some miracles were performed in the company of unbelievers. The presence of critics had no influence on Jesus' power.²⁰

Third, Jesus performed His miracles over a period of time and in great variety. He was not limited in his repertory.²¹

Fourth, we have the testimony of the cured. Frequently the healed person is said to have gone proclaiming that he was healed.²² Unless the whole Gospel record can be proven false, the miracles must be accepted as historically real.

The Nature of the Evidential Value

The problem which confronts us next is: If the evidence is convincing that Christ did work miracles, what do these miracles prove?

We have already observed that neither the Jewish leaders nor the Palestinian populace were necessarily affected by Jesus' miracles although they saw and believed them. Obviously,

if there is an evidential value to miracles, it must involve more than rational assent. Several observations can be made.

The Gospel miracles are not isolated events. They form a part of the message of Christ which must be accepted or rejected but which cannot of itself produce faith.

Inseparably linked with the message of Christ is the person of Christ. The miracles are not simply works wrought by Christ but "are rather a constitutive element of the revelation of God in Christ."²³ A recognition of the miracles of Christ was to be accompanied with a recognition of the commission of Christ. Therefore Jesus said to the unbelieving Pharisees, "But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you" (Matt. 12:28). Nicodemus seems to have recognized this fact when he said to Jesus, "We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with Him" (John 3:2).

Nor can we separate the evidential value of miracles from the subject of personal faith. When Mark states that Jesus could do no mighty work in Nazareth, "save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them" (Mark 6:5), there seems to be a suggestion of inability on the part of Jesus. However, Matthew's rendering of the same account tells us the inability was "because of their unbelief" (Matt. 13:58). It is significant, as Van Der Loos observes, that the censure of the Jewish leaders nowhere falls on the miracles of Jesus as such, but on attendant circumstances. He is reproached with healing on the sabbath (Matt. 12:10-14). They resent Jesus saying that He can forgive sins (Matt. 9:3).²⁴ Even at Jesus' trial the miracles were not discussed although the Old Testament spoke against any magic in Israel (Exod. 22:18). The reason evidential value was lacking in the miracles is not because they were unreal but because unbelief stood in the way.

One further observation needs to be made. Closely related to the rejection in unbelief is the cause of unbelief, namely, the spiritual blindness of the human heart.²⁵ As "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1) but darkened hearts fail to see, so the miracles manifest the power of Christ but blinded minds fail to understand. To the Christian the evidential value is obvious, but to the unregenerated heart it is unconvincing.

The evidential value of miracles is therefore not of such a nature that the "rational" mind must give assent and faith must follow. It is rather a part of the witness concerning the person and message of Christ that may be accepted or rejected. The miracles are simply a part of the larger evidence of the whole testimony of Christ--and beyond this, of the whole Bible. They were never intended to be a separate and unrelated proof of Christianity. They are a part of the whole.

The Apologetic Content of the Gospel Miracles

When miracles are recognized as a part of the self-vindicating aspect of divine revelation, they supply a powerful apologetic value to the Christian witness.

A revelation of Christ's glory. After Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana of Galilee John writes, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him" (John 2:1). It is most fitting that the revelational aspect of Jesus' first miracle is thus emphasized. Thus Garvie writes:

. . . a Christ who being Son of God, and seeking to become Saviour of men, wrought no miracle, would be less intelligible and credible than the Jesus whom the Gospel records so consistently present to us.²⁶

A study of the Gospel miracles reveals how well they do manifest the glory of Christ. They are, as Garvie states, altogether congruous with His Person, His mission, and His message. He is Himself supernatural in His sinless, perfect, moral character, and in His religious consciousness of representing God to man as Messiah and Son of God.²⁷

The reason Christ's glory was recognized by some and not by others has already been stated. Spiritual blindness hindered the unbelieving from seeing it. Bruce elaborates on this point by observing,

The Pharisaic method was to begin at the outside. Starting from the data of miraculous signs viewed abstractly as mere wonders, they tried to read the heart, and they failed. The method of the disciples was to start from within and reason outwards. Discerning the spirit of Jesus with the clear vision of an honest heart, they read in the light of it all His outward conduct, and saw in all His acts, miraculous or otherwise, the self-manifestation of the Christ, the Son of the living God.²⁸

As a revelation of Christ's glory, the miracles relate to His offices of Messiah, Prophet and Priest.

When John the Baptist, through his disciples, asked Jesus, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3), the answer was, "Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk. . ." (Matt. 11:4-5). The coming of Christ and the miracles he performed meant that the Messianic era had dawned.

After the death of Moses, the Old Testament record states:

And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh. . . (Deut. 34:10-11).

As the organ of revelation of God, the prophet was able to perform miracles and signs. Jesus demonstrated that He also came in the ministry of a prophet.

As a priest, Jesus was moved with pity on multitudes and individuals. In Galilee, when He saw the multitudes, "he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd" (Matt. 9:36).

Thus the Gospel records make the point perfectly clear: The miracles were a part of the revelation of the glory of Christ.

A confirmation of Christ's doctrine. The nature of the Gospel miracles demonstrates that their purpose is not simply the proof of doctrine. What they do claim for Christ first of all "is a right to be listened to: [putting] him in the alternative of being from heaven or from hell."²⁹

But this is not their most significant purpose. They are also vehicles of revelation and as such possess characteristics congruous to the nature of the revelation with which they are associated.³⁰ Bruce further explains that, "If the sole purpose of miracles were to serve as evidences of a doctrinal revelation, all miracles would be alike good, provided only they were miraculous."³¹

But, the raising of Lazarus (John 11), revealed Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life; the feeding of the five thousand revealed Him to be the Bread of Life. The true relationship between the miracles and doctrine ". . . is one of mutual interdependence, the miracles proving the doctrines and the doctrines approving the miracles."³² Garvie further states that the miracles ". . . were not primarily credentials of His mission, but only secondarily so as constituents of that mission to reveal God, not only as enlightening truth, but as saving grace."³³

This interdependence of miracle and doctrine further evidences the self-authenticating nature of the Scriptures. Jesus would not overcome unbelief by any display of His power. No sign was given to a "wicked and adulterous generation" (Matt. 16:4). Jesus depreciated the faith in Himself that rested only upon His miracles (John 4:48). He desired faith wrought in a conception of His whole person.

In this sense miracles are a confirmation of Christ's doctrine. His power evidences the origin of His doctrine. The signs illustrate the truth of His doctrine. And the spiritual discernment needed to appreciate the miracles is indicative of the nature of His doctrine.

A stimulation to Christian faith. Assuming that Jesus' purpose in performing miracles was the same as John's purpose for recording them, one of the purposes of the miracles was to arouse faith. John states:

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name (John 20:30-31).

The above assumption regarding the purpose of miracles appears valid, for concerning Jesus' first miracle, John writes that Jesus "manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him" (John 2:11).

This stimulation to faith arises, not so much because the miracles prove the authority of Christ, (for the Pharisees did not accept them as such proof), but because the miracles are

a part of the whole supernatural revelation of God. Because the Word of God is "alive" and "active" (Heb. 4:12), the miracles, as a part of divine revelation, partake of a similar character. As a part of divine revelation they become a part of divine witness to the truth (Heb. 2:4).

When any divine revelation is given, man is called upon to repent and believe. Thus Jesus reproaches the Galilean cities that had had many miracles because they "repented not" (Matt. 11:20-21). Peter reminds the people of Israel at Pentecost that Jesus of Nazareth was "approved of God" among them by "miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). He had a right to claim the allegiance of these people to Christ. The revelation may be rejected but not without the verdict that light has been ignored and repudiated.

As a revelation of God, therefore, the miracles function as a powerful stimulation to faith in Christ.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel accounts were accepted at face value and as such have demonstrated the miracles therein to be supernatural occurrences imbedded in the history of the first century. They are distinguished from the pagan miracles because they go beyond the realm of magic and must be explained in relation to the character and doctrines of Christ. Their occurrence cannot be explained as being the result of psychosomatic healings or feats of superior knowledge. The nature of the miracles defies such an explanation.

While the miracles are not opposed to natural law, nevertheless, they are interferences with it, being above and beyond its limitations and controls. They are the direct results of the power of Christ who performed them as an expression of His Lordship and Saviourhood.

Thus, as an evidence for the truth of Christianity, the miracles form a part of Christ's self-revelation. Only when He is accepted by an act of personal faith can they be properly appreciated. But when they are accepted on that basis, they reveal His eternal Glory as the Creator-God; they confirm His doctrines as the words of a heavenly messenger; and they arouse a faith that is rooted in His incomparable Person.

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