

Miracles and New Testament Studies

by

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In an article about Jesus by Jon Meacham, the editor of *Newsweek*, he asserts that Jesus starts out as a human Jewish prophet, but that the Church in the first four centuries turned him into the majestic Messiah and worldwide Savior. He goes from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. Meacham's lengthy title and subtitle outlines the process:

From Jesus to Christ: How did a Jewish prophet come to be seen as the Christian savior? The epic story of the empty tomb, the early battles, and the making of a great faith.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7244999/site/newsweek/>

Though Meacham's rationalist version of church history was written recently (March 2006), it has been circulating for over two hundred years, and it will crop up again and again.

Meacham assumes without question that Jesus is merely a man with a prophetic gift, but in an epic battle of ideas, sometimes backed up with the sword of Constantine, the Church promoted Jesus to a deified status, even though history does not support and even cannot demonstrate this status. Meacham says that the Church "made" a great faith; he thus implies that the Church did not receive it from the reliable and non-mythological New Testament that tells us accurately who Jesus is—the Christ, the Son of the living God. Meacham separates off history from faith in his title and subtitle.

Where do Meacham's assumption and dichotomy between history and faith come from? Will modern man or woman accept that Jesus is the Christ of faith and history, during his lifetime, one and the same?

Answering these questions would go a long way in challenging modern rationalistic interpretations dominating certain wings of New Testament scholarship, which is based firmly on an antimiracles presupposition.

Enlightened Hyper-skepticism

The Enlightenment (c. 1600-1800+) shook western civilization down to its foundation. Taking their cue from ancient Greek skeptics, philosophers like David Hume (1711-1776) and François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire) (1694-1778) advanced skepticism.

Enlightenment hyper-skepticism influences New Testament scholarship either directly or indirectly, perhaps mostly indirectly. Anthony Flew, a modern defender of Hume, in a chapter fortifying Hume's opposition to miracles, cites an observation from another philosopher, C. S. Peirce.

C. S. Peirce once remarked: "The whole of modern 'higher criticism' of ancient history in general, and of Biblical history in particular, is based on the same logic used by Hume." (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, p. 179)

Peirce is absolutely right about this. Scholars of the New Testament during and shortly after the Enlightenment accepted the closed natural system of cause and effect proclaimed by Enlightenment philosophers. Here are examples of cause and effect: humans talking causes sound (effect). Gravity causes unhindered objects to fall earthwards (effect).

Next, naturalism says that the world of nature—even the entire universe—is the Only Fact, hence the name naturalism (or physicalism or materialism). Can miracles happen in this (allegedly) closed system? Apparently not.

Hume spends a large number of pages in his masterpiece *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* discussing cause and effect. The foundation of human knowledge concerning matters of fact (e.g. the sun rises; salt dissolves in water), as opposed to relations of ideas (e.g. proofs in geometry) is experience with cause and effect, he says. And the foundation of this is the accumulation of many experiences with cause and effect. And the foundation of this is mere custom or habit (Hume, pp. 25-47). How do miracles fit into this system?

If miracles happen—and they do not for Hume—then they would be violations or transgressions of the laws of nature. He writes in his essay on Miracles (Section X):

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (p. 114)

A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent. (p. 115, note 1, emphasis original)

Hume uses, as it were, a two-sided scale, like the scales of justice on the outside of the Supreme Court building. On one side he places our firm and unalterable experience with the laws of nature; on the other he places the reliable testimony for miracles. The first side is always heavier or wins the contest over the reports about miracles. "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence" (p. 110).

Voltaire, in his *Philosophical Dictionary* and his entry on miracles, discusses the views of natural philosophers. "Here are their arguments." Then he begins with a definition of miracles that is acceptable to them:

A miracle is the violation of the divine, immutable, eternal law of mathematics. By this very definition a miracle is a contradiction in terms. A law cannot be at once immutable and violated. (p. 311)

However, at the end of the same article on miracles he acknowledges that all Christians (does he include himself?) agree that the miracles of Christ and the apostles are “incontestably veridical” (p. 316). Christians may believe this, but whether Voltaire himself believes this or not, the die has been cast. Many Enlightenment philosophers, and New Testament scholars following them, accept this definition, as well as Hume’s.

For such philosophers, then, the world we live in is a closed natural system of cause and effect. Thus, when reports of miracles are written, such as the Virgin Birth found in the New Testament, then we ask this question: Which is more probable? Did the early church uncritically accept legends abounding in the Greco-Roman world, or did the miracle happen? A rationalist accepts the first option as more probable.

So it was up to New Testament scholars like David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), to cite only these two examples, to separate historical fact from “myth” without destroying timeless truths that may be embedded in the “myths” of the New Testament documents, particularly the Four Gospels.

However, can it be rightly said that as the early Christians (allegedly) accepted too much “legend” and “myth,” so also modern scholars accept too much skepticism, ironically?

David Friedrich Strauss

Strauss’s book *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846) caused a firestorm, since it was so radical. He was promptly dismissed from his post at Tübingen University. It seems that he absorbs skeptical German Biblical scholarship specifically and western scholarship generally; or perhaps he largely ignites it, as seen here:

Our modern world, on the contrary [to “immediate agency (of God) at every step”], after many centuries of tedious research, has attained a conviction, that all things are linked together by a chain of causes and effects, which suffers no interruption . . . the totality of finite things forms a vast circle, which, except that it owes its existence and laws to a superior power, suffers no intrusion from without (p. 78, section 14).

From this quotation it seems that Strauss does not exclude a “superior power” completely, but in practical terms this power does not work miracles. Hume would agree with Strauss’s belief in a closed system “that suffers no intrusion from without [the outside].” Thus, Strauss offers a criterion by which to distinguish the historical from the unhistorical in the Gospels.

First. When the narration is irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events. Now according to these laws, agreement with all just philosophical conception and all credible experience, the absolute cause never disturbs the chain of secondary causes by single arbitrary acts of interposition . . . When therefore we meet with an account of certain phenomena or events of which it is either expressly stated or implied that they were produced by God himself (divine apparitions—voices from heaven and the like), or by human beings possessed of supernatural powers (miracles, prophecies), such an account is *in so far* to be considered as not historical (p. 88, section 16, emphasis original).

Thus, if an account in the Gospels includes a miracle, then the account is unhistorical. This skepticism about historical reports of miracles is exactly Hume's point, as we shall see in the next article in the series.

But why can we not justly accuse the authors of the Gospels of fabrication? They lived in a different time from Strauss's, he says. Following the (apparently) gullible age of the first century and later, they uncritically accepted too much.

It is impossible, in a critical and enlightened age like our own, to carry ourselves back to a period of civilization in which the imagination worked so powerfully, that its illusions were believed as realities by the very minds that created them (p. 83, section 14)

Strauss goes on to say how much power the person of Jesus worked on the imagination of his followers. The popular hope of the Jewish people generally in a Messianic era was "to be full of signs and wonders" (p. 84, section 14). Miraculous events and prophecies were expected of the Messiah, and Jesus was that Messiah; therefore these things happened to him.

In no case could it be easier for the person who first added any new feature to the description of Jesus [in the Gospels and other early writings], to believe himself its genuineness . . . (p. 84, section 14).

This fits into Strauss's critique of a founder of modern theological liberalism: *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History: a Critique of Schleiermacher's Life of Jesus* (1865). Note how the Christ of faith is separated from the Jesus of history in the title. This move is based squarely on an antimiracles presupposition noted in the excerpts above and here. Strauss writes:

Schleiermacher's Christ is as little a real man as is the Christ of the church. By means of a truly critical treatment of the Gospels one reaches Christ as little as he does the church's Christ. The illusion, which is supported primarily by Schleiermacher's explanations, that Jesus could have been a man in the full sense and still as a single person stand above the whole of humanity, is the chain which still blocks the harbor of Christian theology

against the open sea of rational science. To break this chain is the purpose of the present work, as it has always been of all my theological writings. (p. 5)

If Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is too traditional for Strauss, then this clearly reveals how radical Strauss really is. Schleiermacher is known as the “father of modern liberal Protestant theology.” In any case, one cannot find the divine Christ in “a truly critical treatment of the Gospels.” The Christ of the church and the Gospels is an “illusion.” Such theology blocks the harbor from “rational science.”

So Strauss conforms to his own skeptical age, whereas the early Christians conformed to their (allegedly) naïve age. He has a strong motive to make Christianity appealing to his modern times, so miracles must be excluded or at least reinterpreted as myths containing timeless truths. We today know better than the ancients, especially the primitives in first-century Israel, whose desperation for a Messiah propelled them into fictions that for them were nonetheless true. Strauss must break the chain that hinders “rational science” from intruding into theology and New Testament studies.

Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann picks up where Strauss (and others not dealt with here) left off. Bultmann was one of the most prominent and influential New Testament scholars of the twentieth century. For him the New Testament worldview that includes miracles is no longer believable.

In the article “New Testament and Mythology” (1941) he states that science and technology makes the “world picture” (read: the myths) of the New Testament implausible:

Experience and control of the world have developed to such an extent through science and technology that no one can or does seriously maintain the New Testament world picture. What sense does it make to confess today “he descended into hell” or “he ascended into heaven,” if the confessor no longer shares the underlying mythical world picture of a three-story world? (p. 4)

He adds in the same vein on the same page:

We cannot use electrical lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament. (p. 4)

In the same article he says that we should not believe in the Resurrection:

But we cannot understand a miraculous natural event such as the resuscitation of a dead man—quite apart from its being generally incredible—as an act of God that is in this sense of concern to us. (p. 7)

In a series of lectures delivered at US seminaries in 1951, he reinforces the presupposition that the New Testament worldview is mythical.

The whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological; i.e., the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth, and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of event; and the conception of miracles, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits. (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 15)

The central idea found in that quotation may or may not be borrowed from Hume directly, but it is surely Humean in spirit. Then Bultmann dips his feet into philosophy about cause and effect, a dominant theme in Hume's epistemology (how we acquire and define knowledge).

In the modern conception of the world, the cause-and-effect nexus [connection] is fundamental. Although modern physical theories take account of chance in the chain of cause and effect in subatomic phenomena, our daily living, purposes and actions are not affected. In any case, modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers. (p. 15)

Hume would need clarification on the phrases "cause-and-effect nexus" and "chain of cause and effect," but Bultmann's declaration is clear. Miracles actually happening should be excluded from any interpretation of the New Testament—even a theological one, not to mention an historical one—because modern science renders such primitive conceptions obsolete. Hume would agree.

Finally, Bultmann says in "On the Problem of Demythologizing" (1952) that a being that works a miracle is conceived as a worldly power projected onto the plane of worldly occurrences.

For [the mythical concept of wonder or miracle] represents the working of transcendent [otherworldly] power (the action of God) as an occurrence that at once breaks through the natural or psychological course of occurrences and links them together. Transcendent causality is inserted into the causal chain of events in the world, and a power that in this sense works a miracle is conceived, for better or worse, as a worldly power and projected onto the plane of worldly occurrences. (p. 98).

So what is the goal of demythologizing? It is to know the "benefits" of Christ. Bultmann writes in the same article:

Accordingly, demythologizing of the biblical writings is criticism of the mythological world picture of the Bible . . . In point of fact, scientific thinking does not destroy the mythological world picture of the Bible . . . But

demythologizing interpretation seeks through its criticism to bring out the real intention of the biblical writings. It sees that we cannot talk about God or what transcends the world as it is “in itself,” because in doing so we would objectify God or the transcendent into immanent [counterpart of transcendence], worldly phenomenon. Demythologizing thus seeks to proceed according to Philipp Melanchthon’s dictum “To know Christ is to know his benefits” . . . Its criticism of the biblical writings lies not in eliminating mythological statements but interpreting them; it is not a process of subtraction but a hermeneutical method. (p. 99)

Demythologizing does not destroy the biblical writings, so says Bultmann, but winnows out the chaff of myths and miracles from the wheat of transcendent truths. But is the wheat a strictly human apocalyptic Jesus and the chaff the deity of Christ? If so, then the reversal is based squarely on an antimiracles presupposition.

Conclusion

Both Strauss and Bultmann were motivated to reinterpret the New Testament for the modern times they lived in, the scientific age. Maybe they can be commended for good intentions, but maybe not.

Regardless of their motives, the underlying assumption of Strauss’s and Bultmann’s viewpoint is hyper-skepticism about the supernatural. Though they may not deny God’s existence, miracles simply do not—or cannot—happen. Why not? Because the age of science and technology denies them. Theirs is a closed system, though perhaps some sort of (divine?) work may be done in the human heart through an encounter with the Christ of proclamation.

Nevertheless, the question remains: who is this “demythologized” Christ of faith / Jesus of Nazareth now? A dead “non-resurrected” spirit being who is somehow alive? A feeling? A pleasant thought or idea? Is he a Bodhisattva who can be reached only by long meditation or a whispered prayer? The wizard in the *Wizard of Oz*? Whoever we make him out to be? How does one have an encounter with such a being, if he or it exists, whatever or whoever he or it may be?

Perhaps, though, if you believe in him or it, then your belief is not a lie. That is a paraphrase of the words of George Costanza in the sitcom *Seinfeld*. Costanza was informing Jerry Seinfeld on how to beat a lie detector test. If you believe it, it is not a lie, he told Jerry.

Truth-in-humor aside, let’s step back and look at the big picture. What if some miracles described in the Bible happen today? What if the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk, immediately after prayer in Jesus’ name? So decried by Strauss and Bultmann and others like them, these miracles, resembling Biblical miracles of healing, would in turn support the unique miracles of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, if miracles happen. They would certainly not disconfirm them. Modern miracles—in the age of science and technology—may turn on its head the

demythologization of the New Testament. What if the healing miracles recorded there are all true or have a strong possibility of being true? Why would such miracles not soften or even flatly contradict the hyper-skepticism embodied in Strauss and Bultmann, if miracles indeed happen today?

Thus, can we challenge Strauss's and Bultmann's strong rationalism about the New Testament worldview that includes a "three-story cosmos"? What if the modern age of science and technology does not preclude miracles *a priori* (before investigation)?

The next four articles in this series explore these possibilities.

The articles in this 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

This article originally appeared in *American Thinker* as "Miracles and New Testament Studies"

http://www.americanthinker.com/2006/12/miracles_and_new_testament_stu.html

It has been updated for biblicalstudies.org.uk (July 2007).