

# GRAPPLING WITH MIRACLES

John K. Hopper

---

So someone hands you a book. They tell you that in it you will find the secret of life. In fact, they tell you it lays out how to enjoy eternal life, and with God no less. You are skeptical, but you decide to read at least a bit of it. Some of it sounds pretty reasonable, but then you get to parts where miracles are happening: blind people are seeing, deaf people are hearing, dead people are rising from the dead. You put the book down. This is all too far-fetched for you. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can one possibly take a book seriously that is full of so-called miracles? It might be interesting, even entertaining as a sort of sci-fi book for the ancients. But worthy of banking one's hope and dreams on? Hardly.

Such a response is reasonable, at least on certain levels. Not many of us have ever seen anything that we would call a miracle. So why should we believe in a book that has plenty of them, and even uses them as a chief argument for believing anything else in its pages? If you read this as one who struggles with the miraculous, you are likely nodding your head right now. If you are one who accepts the miraculous, perhaps even a Christian, you might say, "But wait a second, not so quick, why shouldn't we believe in miracles?" It's with these concerns in mind that I wade into the topic of miracles.

## A Miracle Defined

It's probably helpful at the beginning of any discussion to define terms. In this case, let's define what is meant by *miracle*. Once in a while we hear someone say something like, "I got an A. It's a miracle!" Or perhaps, "The collection office gave me an extension on paying back my hospital bill. That's a miracle!" When people use the term *miracle* in this way, they are speaking of something different than what we are examining here. It might be

unusual that we are able to earn an A in a class, and it might have been a moment of compassion that gave us extra time to pay a bill, but we really don't mean that there was something out of the natural order of things that caused those events to play out. When we talk of the miracles of the Bible, however, we aren't just talking about something that is unusual. We are talking about something that came about by a source other than natural causes. If blind people instantaneously gaining their sight at someone's command was just an unusual event, we could pass off the Bible's miracles as just that—unusual events. But they aren't just that. They are "impossible" events. They are something for which there is no natural explanation, nor are they something for which we can expect an explanation regardless of the advancement of science. So when I speak of a miracle here, I speak not of the merely unusual; I speak of unusual events occurring as the result of a supernatural cause. So the question is, "Is it reasonable to believe that such events ever happen?"

## Presuppositions

The beginning place when trying to answer a question like this is an examination of one's presuppositions. There are those who believe in miracles even though they don't have a good reason why, and there are those who say they wouldn't believe in one even if they saw it. This seems a bit unfair. Let's suppose that on life-conducive Planet X, there are little green creatures. No one has ever seen one. One group of people says there are little green creatures on Planet X despite the lack of evidence. The other group says even if they are shown photographs of the little green creatures, they won't believe in them. From my vantage point, the position of both parties seems a bit too settled beforehand. One ought to be open to the possibility or impossibility of little green

creatures on Planet X even if one has an initial opinion that goes the other direction. The same should be the case with the miraculous. I see no reason why we should presume that miracles do or don't happen before looking at any evidence in one direction or the other.

The issue of presuppositions regarding miracles often boils down to one's position regarding the supernatural. If one believes the supernatural exists, then miracles become a possibility. If one believes the supernatural doesn't exist, then miracles are not a possibility. This means that when we speak of the veracity of miracles, we are talking first about the veracity of the supernatural, and in particular the kind of supernatural entity or force that is able to intervene in the natural order of affairs. For the sake of this discussion, however, I will not try to convince you one way or the other in regards to the supernatural question. I simply ask you to be open to the possibility. In the end, you may find there is really good evidence not to believe in the supernatural and perhaps even miracles. But since most people have never really looked strongly into evidence of the supernatural, it seems to me that an open position is the best place to start.

## **Facing Objections**

Let's assume (not presume) for the sake of argument that there is something beyond the matter, space, and energy of our universe. Let's go further and even assume that this supernatural something is akin to the traditional Christian view of God. That is, there is a God and this God is all-powerful. In that case, miracles would enter the realm of possibility. But maybe, I am going too fast. Perhaps you say, "Even if there is a God, that does not mean there are miracles." True enough. Many like Thomas Jefferson have believed in God without believing in miracles. But on what grounds have people like Jefferson dismissed miracles? It seems they have done so on two grounds. First, they have done so by saying out-of-hand that the inexplicability of

miracles makes them impossible. Second, they have done so by arguing that to allow for miracles would mean that the laws of nature can be broken, and that just can't happen. Let's examine these two objections.

***The Inexplicable Nature of Miracles.*** No doubt miracles are something we cannot explain. How a blind man's eyes could be made to see when Jesus puts mud on them is inexplicable. But just because miracles are inexplicable from our vantage point does not mean we should take them out of the realm of possibility and automatically consider miraculous events as erroneously reported, a trumped-up hoax, or a mythological story. It may be that understanding the how behind a miracle is just beyond our capabilities. Let me resort to a well-worn story. It is an odd one. It involves a flower, a dog, a man, and God, and they all talk! It goes like this:

A flower and a dog are having a rather pleasant conversation when they are abruptly interrupted by a newspaper that is thrown on to the lawn. The dog says to the flower, "Excuse me for a minute while I walk over and get the newspaper." The flower is perplexed and says, "You can't walk over to the newspaper. That's impossible." The dog exclaims, "Walking over to the newspaper is easy. Watch me!" The flower watches in amazement and cries, "That's a miracle!" The dog replies, "It would be a miracle if you walked to get the paper, but it's not a miracle for me."

A few minutes later the dog's owner comes out of the house to get the newspaper. He talks to the dog and declares his intention to go hunting on Saturday. The dog asks, "But aren't you afraid it will storm like it has all week?" The man replies, "Well, let me read the newspaper. I'll see if there is a chance of a storm this weekend. The dog objects: "You can't look at a newspaper and tell whether it is going to storm." "Sure I can," responds the man. A few days later when the skies are blue and they travel to their favorite hunting spot, the dog

brings up the weather, "It's a miracle that you could look at the newspaper and know that the weather would clear up." The man replies, it would be a miracle if you could read a newspaper and predict the weather, but it's not a miracle for me."

Later that day, the dog and the man are out hunting. The man shoots a goose out of the sky, but the dog had gotten injured earlier in the day and is in no shape to retrieve the prize from the lake. At just that moment, God shows up. He declares, "I'll walk out on the water and fetch it for you." The man replies, "Thank you for the offer, but it's not possible to walk on water." God ignores the man and strides across the lake. The man gasps, "That's amazing! It's a miracle!" Upon returning with the bird in hand, God is confronted by the man: "Thanks for the bird, but I simply don't believe my eyes. It's just not possible to walk on water." Incredulous, God replies, "It might be impossible for you, but it's not impossible for me."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this is a just a made-up story (the talking flower and dog might have given you a clue!), but it illustrates nonetheless that what might be completely without explanation from our vantage point is not therefore out of the realm of the possibility for someone with a higher degree of capabilities. If miracles by an omnipotent God do happen, frankly we should not expect to explain the how behind them by anything within our natural realm. But lack of explanation says nothing about whether they have taken place or not.

***Miracles and the Laws of Nature.*** But even if miracles are possible in some kind of thought experiment, do not the laws of nature tell us that they are not possible in the reality in which we live? Isn't it right to say that the laws of nature cannot be broken, making miracles something no reasonable person can accept in our scientific age? Good questions, but are they really show stoppers?

Contrary to what many think, miracles do not break the laws of nature. They just indicate that a superseding law is in play. Take, for example, gravity. Its force keeps us stuck to planet Earth. And yet it doesn't always keep us stuck. We hop on a plane and soon the air drafting around the wings takes us thousands of feet up. Is the law of gravity broken at this point? Not at all. It is simply superseded by the principle of aerodynamics for the duration of the flight. In fact, it's only because of the law of gravity that flight is noteworthy at all. The same can be said of miracles. They are noteworthy only because of the laws of nature.

Consider this illustration. Rather than talking flowers and dogs, it involves visiting Martians. They are on an exploratory mission to Earth. Not long after their arrival, they notice humans riding in vehicles. These vehicles do something rather peculiar. When two roads cross, cars going in one direction all stop while cars going the other direction move through the intersection. For some time, they are confused; they can't figure out how the vehicles know when to stop and when to go. So they begin to collect data about everything surrounding the intersection. In time, they recognize a pattern. When the lights are red cars stop, and when the lights are green cars proceed. They test their theory for some time, and then confidently declare the Law of the Intersection.

Not long after discovering the Law of the Intersection, they noticed a box-shaped vehicle with red flashing lights and a loud siren moving right through an intersection, ignoring the red lights while cars in all four directions stop. They are stupefied. Just when they thought they had discovered an unbreakable law, a single vehicle left them confused. So back to work they went. The Law of the Intersection seemed to hold true almost all the time, except in the case of loud, flashing vehicles. In an attempt to uncover the mystery, they followed the flashing vehicles whenever they went through an intersection and recognized that each time they were attending to a person in need. In the end, they

realized that the Law of the Intersection had not been broken, but that it could be superseded by another law – a law they eventually called the Law of Emergencies.<sup>2</sup>

This is a rather long illustration, but I think it makes the point. When we consider miracles, we do not need to think of them as breaking the laws of nature. If miracles do happen, they happen not in violation of the laws of nature, but because they are superseding another law and for good reason. Furthermore, miracles depend on the laws of nature to stand out as miracles.

### **But These Arguments Are Not Enough**

The above discussion is meant to do one thing: to undergird the possibility of miracles by a supernatural entity. But that is all it does. It does not prove that miracles do happen or even that they have happened. The illustrations above simply suggest that if there is a supernatural realm and all-powerful God within it, miracles are not out of the realm of possibility. This still leaves the question: do miracles happen? To answer that question, I would like to examine a couple of biblical miracles, and the evidence surrounding them. If we allow ourselves the possibility of miracles, we then must let evidence convince us one way or another as to whether a miracle has happened. To dismiss the evidence out of hand is to show one's presuppositional bias.

Before diving into particular biblical miracle accounts, it is helpful to say something about the manuscripts in which they are found. These manuscripts were written by eyewitnesses or those who had access to eyewitness reports. They are written in a biographical genre familiar to the day and include people and places and events that are well attested outside of the Bible. In other words, there is nothing about the writings that suggest they are not historical in nature. Now, of course, some will say that the presence of miracles themselves is proof that

they are not historical, but that is begging the question. In other words, one cannot dismiss accounts of miracles as historical by saying that any recorded event of a miracle is automatically not historical. As stated earlier, this is letting presuppositions get in the way, and is an unfair way to analyze the evidence.

### **Examining Miracle No. 1**

With that said, let's consider the miracle of Jesus healing a blind mute, who is also said to have been demon-possessed (Matt 12:22-24). At Jesus' command the man is able to see and talk. The crowd that saw the event was astonished. It had never seen anything like this. Among the crowd were those who felt threatened by Jesus. They were religious leaders and the fact that people were following Jesus and deferring to him was threatening their status. So what was their response to the miracle? They said that Jesus was able to complete the miracle by tapping into the power of demons. What is interesting about their response is that they did not refute the miracle in any way. They take it as a given, but try to deflect its implications, namely that Jesus was sent by God. Now consider, what we have in this story. First, we have an account written by one of Jesus' closest followers (that might seem like a disqualifier in our day, but in the days of Jesus one mark of a trustworthy historical account is that it was written by an insider). Second, the account involves a public event where a *crowd* sees what has happened. Not only are they witnesses to the event, but if it did not happen they could have easily discredited Matthew's account sometime later. We have no record of this. Third, we have the very enemies of Jesus agreeing that a miracle did happen.

Even with this evidence, you might find yourself saying, "Yeah, but it's an old account. Can we really trust it?" Consider, however, being told by your friend that an overweight pitcher who had never hit more than a single in his entire career managed to hit an inside the park

homerun without an error by the defense. You laugh at your friend. This just could not have occurred. But then you go to your trusted internet sports sources. And there it is—stories from respected writers about the event. Furthermore, there are interviews from the losing team's network that confirm the homerun. Would you change your view of whether the event took place? If so, would you change your view about such an event if it took place 75 years ago and all you have is numerous newspaper clippings about it that report eyewitnesses accounts? It seems to me you would change your position. The 75-year-old record of the event has the marks of authenticity even though it is old and remarkable. My question is why should we not be willing to do the same with historical records that span back farther than that? At the very least, it seems that one should conclude there is a good probability that the event took place as recorded.

## **Examining Miracle No. 2**

The second biblical event I'd like you to consider is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. From a biblical standpoint, there is no miracle bigger than this. The Bible even declares that if the resurrection didn't happen as a historical time and space event, any and everyone is free to trash the whole Christianity thing. So what is the evidence surrounding the resurrection? It's several fold. The first piece of evidence is that Jesus was crucified by the Romans and died. His dead body was then put in a tomb that was placed under Roman guard. This is the biblical record, and this is the record of extra-biblical accounts. Second, Jesus' body went missing from the tomb a few days after he died, and this despite the Roman guard. Jesus' detractors, the religious power brokers of the day, affirm that his body went missing. Third, Jesus appeared to over 500 people in a forty-day period. These appearances were in many different settings and showed Jesus eating, talking, and walking. Fourth, after Jesus' resurrection his disciples transformed from a

scared group of men fearing for their lives to bold proclaimers of Jesus' resurrection. Fifth, some of those who had fiercely opposed Jesus' ministry began to proclaim that he was the Christ after his resurrection. Again, these details are shared in the Bible, but many of them are also reported in historical accounts from those who were not followers of Jesus or supporters of Christianity.

So how is one supposed to deal with this evidence? Some say Jesus didn't really die. That the Romans thought they killed him, but they really didn't. But those who know anything about Roman crucifixion don't take this explanation seriously. Could a man who had been beaten heavily, been placed on a cross that was designed to suffocate people with 100% efficiency, and been speared in the side revive inside a tomb, roll away the massive stone guarding its entrance, fight off guards, and then appear healthy in his interaction with others immediately? Hardly a good explanation.

Others say that while people reported that they saw Jesus, they were likely just hallucinating. Many so wanted Jesus to be alive that they imagined they saw him alive. Again, this is hardly a reasonable explanation for Jesus' appearances. It is true that people hallucinate, but there is no evidence that there is such a thing as group hallucinations. Jesus appeared not just to people individually but to large groups of people and they all saw the same thing. And seeing is not all they did; they touched Jesus and heard him as well.

Some say that the resurrection is a big hoax, that the followers of Jesus wanted to create a story of Jesus as the Messiah so they would not lose face or perhaps gain a little social status themselves. This might be a possibility but given that their choice to speak of Jesus' resurrection cost them all very dearly (most were martyred) at the very least they seriously miscalculated the effects of their efforts. Furthermore, throughout the biblical record of Jesus' death and resurrection the disciples are shown to

deny Jesus, run for cover, and doubt him, until they are fully convinced of his resurrection. If the disciples wanted to build themselves into something special by declaring Jesus' resurrection, wouldn't they have portrayed themselves in a better light? They even declared that it was women who first saw the resurrected Jesus. The last thing a respected Jew would have done in that day is appeal to women as the first witnesses of a miracle, unless, of course, it really was the women who first saw the resurrected Jesus.

Finally, we find that those who had been opposed to Jesus earthly ministry, like Paul of Tarsus or Jesus' own brother, did an about face when confronted with the resurrected Jesus. These are men who would have had access to all the evidence and knew they would pay a deep cost for becoming adherents of Jesus. How does one explain that apart from a historical bodily resurrection?

Given this information, is it possible to still take the position that the miracle of the resurrection never took place? Sure it is. But that position would not be based on the available evidence. Most likely it is taken only because one has already decided that no evidence will ever be enough to convince them that a miracle had taken place. And that seems to me a rather un-

modern position to take. Are we not supposed to be living in a day and age when we follow the evidence wherever it leads?

### **Settling the Question**

Throughout this discussion, we have been answering the question: can and do miracles take place? The 'can' part of the question is one of possibility. The 'do' part of the question is a matter of evidence. I don't claim to have created an airtight case in anything I have written, but it does seem the evidence makes belief in miracles a position a reasonable person can hold. In taking this position, I am not saying that miracles happen all the time. If they did, they wouldn't seem all that miraculous. In fact, one should note that miracles don't really happen that often in the Bible. They are generally clumped around periods in history where God is intent on making his presence and activity known. In other words, just as there are good reasons for the Law of the Emergency to supersede the Law of the Intersection on certain occasions, so the Bible seems to present a picture of God only superseding the natural order of things when he finds it particularly valuable to let us know of his existence, his power, and his ways.

© 2016 John Hopper

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a recorded illustration given in "Dialogue Two: How Can a Rational Person Believe in Miracles?" [www.theseearchformeaning.org](http://www.theseearchformeaning.org).

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Ken Boa & Larry Moody, *I'm Glad You Asked* (Search Ministries, 2013), 42-43.