



C.S. LEWIS ON MIRACLES: WHY THEY ARE POSSIBLE AND SIGNIFICANT

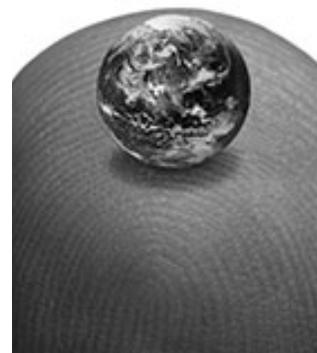


Those who wish to succeed must ask the right preliminary questions” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.3.1). This statement by the ancient philosopher is the first sentence of C.S. Lewis’s insightful book *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. One of his apologetic works, this book addresses questions regarding the reasonableness of the belief in miracles and considers the question of how biblical miracles fit into the larger framework of the gospel story. Lewis took these questions seriously because he knew that our conclusions about the possibility and significance of miracles surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus are of critical importance to the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:13–14). In another work, he wrote,

*One is very often asked at present whether we could not have a Christianity stripped, or, as people who ask it say, “freed” from its miraculous elements, a Christianity with the miraculous elements suppressed. Now, it seems to me that precisely the one religion in the world, or, at least, the only one I know, with which you could not do that is Christianity.*¹

No doubt Lewis considered miracles to be a crucial topic. I originally decided to delve into his writings on the subject several years ago when asked to speak at a conference that focused on the legacy of C.S. Lewis. As usual, I was not disappointed with the time and effort I spent to understand his thinking. There is a reason why all of his books remain in publication, and he is still one of the most popular Christian authors of the twentieth century.

On September 8, 1947, C.S. Lewis was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline “Oxford’s C.S. Lewis, His Heresy: Christianity.” The six-page article identified Lewis as “one of a growing band of heretics among modern intellectuals: an intellectual who believes in God . . . not a mild and vague belief, for he accepts ‘all the articles of the Christian faith.’” One of these “articles” was the belief in miracles. The emergence of public intellectuals such as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and others was in clear contrast to many of his colleagues at Oxford, as well as intellectuals throughout Europe, who were securely convinced of a naturalistic worldview that ruled out the possibility of miracles. Lewis described this version of naturalism as “the doctrine that only Nature — the whole interlocked system — exists.”² He was able to insightfully critique naturalism because he had previously embraced a naturalistic worldview but later became convinced of the truth and beauty of a classical Christian worldview.



From the very beginning of his embrace of Christianity, Lewis realized the difference that the existence of supernatural realities (the triune God, demons, miracles, etc.) makes for how we understand and interpret life. On November 26, 1942, he preached a sermon on the topic of miracles, at the Church of Saint Jude, that was based on an article he had written for the Anglican newspaper *The Guardian*, earlier in the same year. As Lewis continued to communicate the truths of the Christian faith and defend these truths from various misunderstandings and challenges, friends and colleagues encouraged him to persist in writing about the topic of miracles. This led to the publishing of *Miracles* in 1947.

Before we delve deeper into Lewis’s approach to the possibility and significance of miracles, it is helpful to give a brief overview of how the Bible and classical Christianity approach the topic of miracles. The Scriptures reveal a God who is living and personal (Exod. 3:14). He is free to act in history to reveal, create, sustain, redeem, heal, judge, and so forth. Reality is not limited to physical realities, but also includes spiritual realities (Col. 1:16). The seen and the unseen worlds are both real and interactive (Gen. 1; Eph. 6:12). The creator God is unique in that He is both above and beyond the rest of creation (transcendent, Isa. 55:8–9; Eccl. 5:2), and He is also personally present to His creation (immanent, Ps. 104:29–30; Acts 17:27b–28). God actively created everything (Gen. 1:1), and through Him everything holds together (Col. 1:16–17;



Heb.1:3); therefore, we live in an orderly, consistent world which we can investigate with confidence. Because the God of classical Christian theism is transcendent, He is not restricted to act from within the patterns of nature that He established and upholds but is free to act in unusual ways to reveal, save, heal, and surprise (signs and wonders).

Philosophical Skepticism Concerning Miracles³

In contrast to the supernatural view of reality, there are individuals, groups, and movements who embrace worldviews that challenge the rationality and historical witness to the miracles of the Bible using what we will refer to as a *philosophical argument*. For instance, many naturalists claim that miracle reports are necessarily false since the “Cosmos is all there is and all there ever will be.”⁴ C.S. Lewis encountered many people who rejected the belief in miracles — the rejection being a common view in the academic circles of his day due to the impact of the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A good place to start when addressing any controversial question is by defining terms. Lewis defined a miracle as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power.”⁵ The most significant point about this definition is that it requires the existence of a power beyond nature that can decide to act within nature. This is important to emphasize, because many skeptics, in his day and ours, are not open to evidence but operate on the assumption of naturalism. Lewis writes, “Many people think one can decide whether a miracle occurred in the past by examining the evidence ‘according to the ordinary rules of historical inquiry.’ But the ordinary rules cannot be worked until we have decided whether miracles are possible, and if so, how probable they are.”⁶



Later he writes, “If Naturalism is true, then we do know in advance that miracles are impossible: nothing can come into Nature from the outside because there is nothing outside to come in, Nature being everything.”⁷ This is simply a case of begging the question (assuming what one wants to prove). If naturalism is the “whole show,” then everything, even our reasoning process, can be explained from within the whole system of nature. But then it is difficult to see how our knowledge can be anything other than the result of natural processes. So why should we assume that naturalism is true? After all, we have good reasons to believe that our experience

of reasoning, moral oughtness, and beauty point to transcendent realities.⁸

Scientific Skepticism Concerning Miracles

Others have disputed miracle claims using what we will refer to as a *scientific argument*. This type of argument claims that ancient people were childish and superstitious, mostly ignorant of how the natural laws of the universe work, so they posited miracles to events that seemed mysterious. As the theory goes, this prescientific way of understanding the world was to be expected of people then, but as the scientific way of thinking has progressed, filling in our gaps in knowledge, supernatural explanations became less needed and less credible. C.S. Lewis described the scientific argument against the possibility of miracles in this way:

Any day you may hear a man (and not necessarily a disbeliever in God) say of some alleged miracle, “No. Of course I don’t believe that. We know it is contrary to the laws of Nature. People could believe it in olden times because they didn’t know the laws of Nature. We know now that it is a scientific impossibility.”⁹

Robert Funk, founder of the radical Jesus Seminar, is a good example of someone making the scientific argument.

The notion that God interferes with the order of nature... is no longer credible... Miracles... contradict the regularity of the order of the physical universe... God does not interfere with the laws of nature... The resurrection



*of Jesus did not involve the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus did not rise from the dead, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense.*¹⁰

In dealing with this argument against the possibility of miracles, Lewis pointed out that it assumes that people living in “olden times” lacked any understanding of the laws of nature. In response to this assumption of ignorance, he stated that while it is true that we know a lot more about the natural world than prescientific people, Joseph and his contemporaries knew that women do not get pregnant and have a baby unless they have lain with a man and dead people do not rise from the dead. That is, of course, unless a transcendent, personal God actively causes something unusual to take place. It is important to realize that Lewis is not questioning the principle of regularity that is a foundational assumption of science; rather, he is pointing out that Christian theism is a more multifaceted view of reality, since it accepts the regularity of natural laws but is also open to exceptional events known as miracles. Since science should always remain open to where the evidence leads, it is reasonable to remain open to the evidence of a miracle. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman (1918–1988) expressed, “Many scientists do believe in both science and God, the God of revelation, in a perfectly consistent way.”¹¹

Experiential Skepticism Concerning Miracles

Debates about the possibility of miracles have sometimes led to considerations of probability. So the question of miracles is stated like this: In light of the constant experience of natural law, doesn't it always make more sense to doubt the report that an exception to the laws of nature has taken place (i.e., a miracle) than to believe the report of miracle? I will refer to this an *experiential argument* against miracles. One name that is frequently associated with this type of argument is the eighteenth-century skeptical philosopher David Hume. Hume is a good example of a person making this type of argument against the probability of miracles because his views were considered conclusive by some in his own day and are still thought to be convincing by many contemporary skeptics, such as Michael Shermer and Richard Dawkins.¹² Hume defined a miracle as a “violation of the laws of nature.” His argument could be summed up by the statement: since natural laws are firmly established on the basis of uniform human experience, it is always much more likely that there is some natural explanation for a supposed miracle than that an exception to the uniform natural laws has occurred. Lewis described Hume's probability argument with clarity:



*The more often a thing has been known to happen, the more probable it is that it should happen again; and the less often the less probable. Now the regularity of Nature's course, says Hume, is supported by something better than the majority vote of past experiences: it is supported by their unanimous vote, or, as Hume says, by “firm and unalterable experience”. There is, in fact, “uniform experience” against Miracle; otherwise, says Hume, it would not be a Miracle. A miracle is therefore the most improbable of all events. It is always more probable that the witnesses were lying or mistaken than that a miracle occurred.*¹³

Lewis writes that from Hume's point of view, “historical statements about miracles are the most intrinsically improbable of all historical statements.”¹⁴ In Hume's way of thinking, not only are miracles most improbable due to the uniformity of nature, but miracle reports are also unreliable because they are dependent on the testimony of witnesses who were ignorant and superstitious. For Hume, as was the case with many Enlightenment deists, personal experience was much more reliable than the testimony of prescientific people. Lewis and others have pointed out that Hume proceeds through his argument against the possibility of an exception to the regularities of nature (i.e., miracle) with the assumption that experience proves the “uniformity of nature.” But the answer to the question of whether we can know if a miracle has taken place should not be predetermined by an assumption of the uniformity of nature since this would also be a case of begging the question.

Concerning Hume's questioning of the credibility of ancient witnesses to miraculous events, I would point to the earlier responses made to scientific arguments. I would also point out that perhaps Hume's conclusions about the possibility of



miracles were based on his own limited experience. Maybe miracles were occurring more frequently in Hume's day than he was aware of, but they were happening outside his sphere of contact. In our own day, contemporary New Testament scholar Craig Keener has investigated thousands of eye-witness miracle accounts from all around the world and found many to be highly credible. He presents the results of his investigations in a two-volume work (1,172 pages) titled *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*. He writes,

*a priori modernist assumption that genuine miracles are impossible is a historically and culturally conditioned premise. This premise is not shared by all intelligent or critical thinkers, and notably not by many people in non-Western cultures.*¹⁵

Much more could be said in response to David Hume's objections to miracles, but contemporary philosopher of science John Earman says it well in his book *Hume's Abject Failure*:

*It is not simply that Hume's essay does not achieve its goals, but that his goals are ambiguous and confused. Most of Hume's considerations are unoriginal, warmed over versions of arguments that are found in the writings of predecessors and contemporaries. And the parts of "Of Miracles" that set Hume apart do not stand up to scrutiny. Worse still, the essay reveals the weakness and the poverty of Hume's own account of induction and probabilistic reasoning. And to cap it all off, the essay represents the kind of overreaching that gives philosophy a bad name.*¹⁶

Concerning the Grand Miracle

When considering questions about the possibility, meaning and significance of miracles, C.S. Lewis also reminds us of the importance of miracles to the larger story line of the Bible. He points out that miracle stories in the Bible are not made-up tales passed along mainly for the purpose of communicating some moral or spiritual lessons; rather, they report the revelatory acts of God, such as creation, the exodus, revelation, incarnation . . . that reveal God's greatness (Exod.15:6; Mark 2:1–11; Luke 5:17), point to the in-breaking of God's kingdom (John 4:23–25; Luke 9:6) and identify God's messengers and their message (Exod. 7:9; John 10:25; 2 Cor. 12:12). In the case of the Gospels, Lewis understood that the miracles recorded in them are for the purpose of shining a spotlight on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He wrote that the miracles found in the Bible, "prepare for, exhibit, or result from the Incarnation," which he refers to as "The Grand Miracle."¹⁷ It is clear from Lewis's writings that when he refers to "the Incarnation" he is referring to the entire life of Christ (birth, early years, adult ministry, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension). Lewis wrote, "The Christian story is precisely the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him."¹⁸

Lewis is in agreement with the apostle John, who wrote concerning Jesus, "the Word was God" (John1:1) and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14 ESV). So questions concerning the possibility of miracles are related to even larger questions such as, What is God like? How does God interact with the world? Does God care about His creation? Having done the hard work of asking and answering the right preliminary questions, Lewis winsomely shines a light on the reality in which a creative, powerful, and loving God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. This is unquestionably the Grand Miracle.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son into the world that we might live. (1 John 4:9–10 NIV) ■



NOTES

- ¹ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 81.
- ² C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; reprt., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 18.
- ³ My approach to explaining Lewis’s perspective on miracles has been influenced by Art Lindsley’s excellent book *C.S. Lewis’s Case for Christ: Insights from Reason, Imagination and Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).
- ⁴ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.
- ⁵ Lewis, *Miracles*, 5.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- ⁸ See Paul Copan. *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press: 2007), 79–100.
- ⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 72.
- ¹⁰ Cited in Gregory A. Boyd and Paul Rhodes Eddy. *Lord or Legend: Wrestling with the Jesus Dilemma* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 22.
- ¹¹ Cited in Henry F. Schaefer, *Science and Christianity: Conflict or Coherence* (Athens: Apollos Trust, 2008), 11.
- ¹² See Lee Strobel’s interview with Michael Shermer, in *The Case for Miracles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 52–55.
- ¹³ Lewis, *Miracles*, 161–62.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 2:764.
- ¹⁶ Cited in Strobel. *The Case for Miracles*, 91.
- ¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, “The Grand Miracle,” in *God in the Dock*, in *The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1996), 354.
- ¹⁸ Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans), 80.



I contend that in all these miracles alike the incarnate God does suddenly and locally something that God has done or will do in general. Each miracle writes for us in small letters something that God has already written, or will write, in letters almost too large to be noticed, across the whole canvas of Nature.

— C.S. Lewis



- 1** What were David Hume’s objections to miracles? After considering the article, how would you respond to them?
- 2** What did C.S. Lewis refer to as “The Grand Miracle”? What is the significance of miracles to the larger storyline of the Bible?



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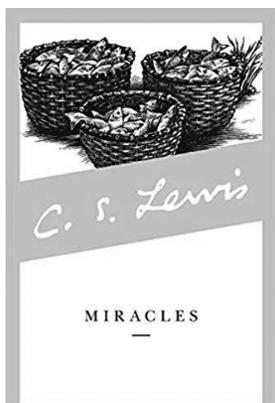
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Bill Smith is the Director of the C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program Atlanta. He also founded On the Way Ministries, an equipping ministry devoted to renewing the mind, engaging the heart, and encouraging community. Bill teaches in a variety of contexts in order to help men and women to know God in a deeper way and develop practical wisdom for every area of life. Bill lives in Duluth, Georgia, with his wife, Lisa, and two daughters Jessica and Jana.



RECOMMENDED READING

John Eldredge, *Epic* (Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Do miracles really happen? Can we know if the supernatural world exists? “The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares the way for this, or results from this.” In *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis takes this key idea and shows that a Christian must not only accept but rejoice in miracles as a testimony of the unique personal involvement of God in creation. Using his characteristic warmth, lucidity, and wit, Lewis challenges the rationalists and cynics who are mired in their lack of imagination and provides a poetic and joyous affirmation that miracles really do occur in everyday lives.