

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Miracles, Session 4, A Response to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles

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This is our course, The Miraculous and the Miracles of Jesus, the fourth part of the first section, which we call The Miraculous, Answering Objections. Here, we will respond to a number of the major arguments proposed against the occurrence of miracles. For further discussion, see Geisler, *Miracles in the Modern Mind*, 1992, Colin Brown, *Miracles in the Critical Mind*, 1984, Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 1997. [Also Craig Keener's 2 vols. *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2011].

First, we look at the deductive impossibility of miracles, Baruch Spinoza. The argument I'm giving here is Geisler's slight simplification of Spinoza's argument. First, miracles are violations of natural law.

I'll give each argument first and then come back and critique it point by point. Two, natural laws are immutable. Three, it's impossible to violate immutable laws.

Therefore, miracles are impossible. In response to Spinoza, miracles are violations of natural law. Some miracles are probably violations of natural law, though many of them may override natural law in some way or another, as we override gravity by picking up a pen or pencil.

So, one, miracles are violations of natural law, is probably true in some cases and false in others. Natural laws are immutable. This depends on what we mean by natural law.

If we define natural law to be immutable, it may be that there's no such thing as natural law. In any case, we do not know enough to be sure that the regularities we know about in nature are immutable. And immutable to whom? Obviously, humans cannot change the constant of gravitation or suspend Newton's laws of motion, but it's not obvious that God cannot.

Third, it's impossible to violate immutable laws. Statement three is true so long as we qualify it by saying it is impossible for someone to violate laws that are immutable to them. Four, therefore, miracles are impossible.

Well, if one is not true in some cases, and two, natural law is immutable, may either be an empty class or not immutable to God, it follows that Spinoza's argument is not sound. Another deductive formulation. One, a miracle is a violation of natural law.

Two, to violate a law is to be illegal, immoral, irrational, or gauche, violating an aesthetic law, if you like. God is not illegal, immoral, irrational, or gauche. Therefore, God at least cannot do miracles, though perhaps Satan could.

In response to this, a miracle is a violation of natural law, the same problem as Spinoza's first statement. To violate a law is to be illegal, immoral, irrational, or gauche. Statement two assumes that natural law can be fitted into one of the categories of civil law, to which to violate is illegal; moral law, which to violate is immoral; logical law, which to violate is irrational; or aesthetic law, which to violate is gauche.

But this does not follow. To violate a natural law is merely to be miraculous, which is how the God of the Bible is regularly pictured. God is not illegal, immoral, irrational, or gauche, granted.

Therefore, God at least cannot do miracles, though perhaps Satan could. The problems with one and especially two invalidate this argument. The inductive improbability of miracles, David Hume.

My version of Hume's argument goes like this. One, experience is our only guide to all decisions regarding the matter's effect. Two, the laws of nature are established by a firm and unalterable experience. Three, our belief in the reliability of witnesses is based on the reports usually agreeing with facts. Four, miracles are violations of natural law. Five, thus, miracles go against the very evidence by which we determine matter's effect. Six, therefore, one should not accept testimony regarding a miracle unless all the alternatives are more miraculous than the miracle itself—response to Hume. Experience is our only guide to all decisions regarding the matter's effect.

This is a pure empiricist statement of how we know, and pure empiricism may not turn out to be satisfactory. Yet Hume is right to ask what warrant we can put forward for belief in miracles. It must be granted that even revelation needs to be tested in some way to avoid accepting false revelations.

Compare the biblical injunctions to test everything. Galatians 6 :3-5, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, 1 John 4:1, Deuteronomy 13:1-3, Deuteronomy 18:18-22. So, we look at some of those passages, the Bible basically on testing.

Galatians 6:3, 4, and 5. If anyone thinks he is something when he's nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then, he can take pride in himself without comparing himself to someone else, for each one should carry his own load.

So, the Bible definitely indicates we need to test ourselves. 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20. Do not put out the Spirit's fire.

Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold to the good.

1 John 4:1. Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets are going out into the world. Deuteronomy 13:1-3. If a prophet or one who foretells my dreams appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, quote, let us follow other gods, gods you have not known, and let us worship them, you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer.

The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. Deuteronomy 18:18-22. God, speaking to Moses, says, I will raise up for them, the Israelites, a prophet like you, like Moses, from among their brothers.

I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.

You may say to yourselves, how can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord? If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

Response to Hume. The law we saw first with that, although empiricism may not be the sole way of knowing things, yet we do have a responsibility to test things, even revelation, etc. Hume's second claim is that the laws of nature are established by firm and unalterable experience.

The laws of nature defined empirically are established by experience, observation, and experiment, and must be pretty firm to be denoted laws. Yet it is unclear in what sense the experience is unalterable. Does Hume mean no exceptions have ever been observed? If so, he begs the question of the occurrence of the miraculous by secretly importing his answer into statement 2.

3. Our belief in the reliability of witnesses is based on their reports, usually agreeing with the facts. Our belief in the reliability of a particular witness is somewhat more complicated than this. If he only usually tells the truth or makes sound judgments, we probably won't put much stock in his reports. Some combination of the number of witnesses, their known character, and what they might have gained from lying will usually figure in our calculations here.

4. Miracles are violations of natural law. Strangely enough, 4 is true in an empirical sense, but it is not when used by Spinoza in his statement 1 deductive sense. Miracles clearly go against what we normally experience.

5. Thus, miracles go against the evidence by which we determine matters of fact. Hume is mistaken here once we adjust 3 as we suggested above, but he is correct in that we tend to be more skeptical in proportion to the peculiarity of the event reported. Compare the report of recently seeing a close friend, recently seeing the President of the United States, recently seeing Ben Franklin, or recently seeing God.

6. One should not accept testimony regarding a miracle unless all the alternatives would be more miraculous than the miracle itself. Hume here guarantees that we'll never accept the report of a miracle, nor probably even if we saw one ourselves, since witnesses can lie, and our senses can deceive us. Here's the rub.

Hume would have us explain away miracles, even if they occur. One can never set the level of certainty so high that one will never admit a miracle. That's a dangerous tactic.

We move on then to the practical irrelevance of miracles. This is the Newman-Geisler-Brown version of Kant's argument. 1. We cannot know things as they really are but only as they appear to us.

2. Therefore, any claimed knowledge of God and transcendent reality is just unwarranted speculation. 3. Nevertheless, in order to function practically in this world, we postulate God, freedom, and immortality as a basis for morality and duty. 4. Miracles either happen daily, seldom, or never. If daily, they're not miracles but natural laws. If seldom, we have no basis for knowing them. So probably never.

True religion, consisting of fulfilling all duties as though they were divine commands, needs no miracle to do what is right. Miracles rather tend to corrupt one's motives. Therefore, miracles are irrelevant to everyday life and to true religion.

Response to Kant. Well, first, he says, we cannot know things as they really are, but only as they appear to us. Well, my response is that we cannot know things as they really are unless we know how they really are.

Statement one is self-defeating. We may think we cannot know how they really are, but we don't know. We're not behind any claimed knowledge of God, and transcendent reality is just unwarranted speculation.

Well, God, who knows all things as they really are, can reveal to us what we need to know along these lines since he created our capacities and knows our limitations. Of

course, not every claim to revelation is valid. Nevertheless, in order to function practically in this world, says Kant, we postulate God, freedom, and immortality as a basis for morality and duty.

God, freedom, and immortality are indeed a basis for morality and duty, but those with Kant's epistemology have no strength to stand against the forces of skepticism that deny these. C.S. Lewis, in his allegory, *Pilgrim's Regress*, does a nice job of showing this very problem. If you just say, well, this forms a basis for morality and duty, a skeptic might say, so what? We don't know whether it's really true or not, and I'm going to do what I want.

In fact, we've had those kind of people all through history. 4. Miracles either happen daily, seldom, or never. If daily, not a miracle, but natural law, if seldom, no basis for knowing them, so probably never.

5. Jesus probably worked miracles daily during his ministry on earth, and they have probably occurred very rarely at some other times in human history. We're not suggesting that we would fully understand a miracle or be absolutely certain whether an event was miraculous or not, but certain miracles exhaust the available probabilities. See Judges 6:36-40, or 1 Samuel 6:1-9, 1 Samuel 3:1, miracles rare.

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare, there were not many visions. Judges 6:12, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.

But Sir Gideon replied, If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all these wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, Did not the Lord bring us out of Egypt? But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us in the hand of Gideon. Exhaust the probabilities. Judges 6, 36-40, Gideon said to God, If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised, look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor.

If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said. And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day, squeezed the fleece, wrung out the dew, a bowl full of water.

Then Gideon said to God, Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me to test one more test with the fleece.

This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew. That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry, and all the ground was covered with dew.

Well, you really do exhaust the probabilities very quickly on something like this. When Gideon sets up the two tests, they're matched, they're reverse tests, and they

are trying to figure out how you can get the climate to shift that quickly. All of that sort of thing is very tricky, huh? Another example, 1 Samuel 6:1. When the ark of the Lord had been in Philistine territory for seven months, the Philistine called for the priests and diviners and said, What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it back to its place. They had been experiencing some fairly fierce plague, and none of the cities wanted to have it anymore.

Well, a few verses on, then the priests and diviners respond, Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When he, God, treated them harshly, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way? Now, get a new cart ready with two cows that have calved and never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pin them up. Take the ark of the Lord, put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering.

Send it on its way, but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own country toward Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us but that it happened to us by chance.

Well, that's really quite a clever test again, and you really have to work hard to figure out ways of that test not being a good test for this sort of thing. After all, the diviners already had you put cows that hadn't pulled a cart before and take their calves away, which they will want to go back to, and then see what it does. What it did was indicate that God was going to take the ark back by means of the cows.

So that, I think, suggests that we can exhaust the probabilities and, therefore, we can distinguish a miracle from a non-miracle at the level of certainty that humans have for making everyday decisions. Response to Kant 5. True religion, consisting of fulfilling all duties as though they were divine commands, needs no miracle to do what is right. Miracles rather tend to corrupt one's motives.

It's true that true religion needs no miracle to do what is right, but man is no longer capable of doing what is right, and he needs a redemptive miracle of atonement and regeneration to solve this problem. The miracles of scripture point to the Redeemer God, who is able and willing to intervene for our salvation. 6. Therefore, miracles are irrelevant to everyday life and true religion.

Miracles are only irrelevant to non-redemptive religions like deism and theological liberalism, neither of which is going to save us at the Last Judgment. Okay, we move on to another one. Ancient Ignorance and Miracles, Adolf Harnack.

This is my version of Harnack's argument. 1. People in antiquity thought that miracles occurred every day, so it's not surprising that miracles were reported in the ministry

of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets. 2. People in antiquity did not understand nature and its laws, therefore they regularly mistook natural events for miracles.

Response to Harnack. His first statement. People in antiquity thought that miracles occurred every day, so it is not surprising that miracles were reported in the ministry of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets.

2. There are people both in antiquity and today who believe miracles occur every day. 3. There are others both then and now who deny miracles altogether. Back then it would have been the Epicureans and the Sadducees.

4. Probably, there are more skeptics today than back then, but probably both the skeptics and the everyday miracle people are wrong. 5. In any case, it was widely realized that John the Baptist didn't do miracles, John 10:41, so they didn't have to be reported of famous prophets, and the Sadducees realized that it was impossible for them to deny that Jesus had done miracles, John 9:18, 11, 47, 12:10, and compare Acts 4:16. 2. People in antiquity did not understand nature and its laws, therefore they regularly mistook natural events for miracles. This is basically absurd.

None of Jesus' miracles can easily be converted into misunderstood natural events. And that's again the thing that the earlier liberals got all the flack about Jesus walking up the hill into the clouds, the people sharing their lunches, and that sort of thing. None of Jesus' miracles can easily be converted into misunderstood natural events, at least not taken as a group.

Three cases of misdiagnosed death that just happened to revive when Jesus shows up. Jesus walking on the shore or a sandbar instead of on the water, you know, give me a break. Lastly, we look at miracles in a closed universe.

Rudolf Bultmann. This is my version of Bultmann's argument. 1. Modern science and history operate on the assumption that our universe is a closed system of cause and effect so that they can describe, explain, and predict what is happening.

Even fundamentalists practically operate this way when they use electricity, modern medicine, and modern technology. 2. The old mythical view of nature was that God, angels, demons, etc. were direct causes of lightning, sickness, earthquakes, and storms.

Today, we know better. Response to Bultmann. Modern science and history operate on the assumption that our universe is a closed system of cause and effect, so that they can describe, explain, and predict what is happening.

They do operate on that assumption, but neither modern science nor history knows enough to know that the universe is a closed system. It appears to be a system in the

sense that similar causes are operating at great distances nearby as best we can tell, but we do not know how to explain the universe's origin, nor the origin of life, nor the striking examples of apparent design in nature apart from a mind behind the universe. We certainly have no full explanation of what history is all about nor proof that it is meaningless.

The discoveries of electricity, modern medicine, and modern technology are not inconsistent with Christian theism, and many Christians were involved in their discovery. The old mythical view of nature was that God, angels, demons, etc, were direct causes of lightning, sickness, earthquakes, and storms. Today, we know better.

Well, Christians and others have sometimes imagined that they knew a great deal more about what God, Satan, angels, and demons were doing than they really did. You see that several places are in scripture and plenty are in church history. But the Bible nowhere says that God runs nature without mediation, or that Satan and demons are the sole causes of disease, etc.

We certainly do not know enough about either medicine or the weather today to say that there is never any supernatural intervention in either, much less God's providential guidance of such events. Are miracles real? There is good evidence for divine intervention and creation. This is discussed in some detail in our apologetic course.

The origin of the universe, design in the universe, the correlation between Genesis 1 and the origin of the earth, the origin of life, the origin of major body plans in living things, and the origin of mankind. So, I would appreciate it if you take a look at our IBRI PowerPoints on our website, www.ibri.org. There is good evidence for divine intervention in history. This is also discussed in some detail in our Biblical Foundations and Synoptic Gospels courses at Biblical Seminary and again in our IBRI website.

The origin of Israel, fulfilled prophecy, the origin of Christianity, and the phenomenon of Jesus' ministry, including his claims and miracle accounts, especially his resurrection. If you think of the Jefferson Bible, which you may or may not have heard of, Jefferson is a deist. Basically, to make a satisfactory gospel account to him, he had to take out all of Jesus' claims, the miracles that he did, and the resurrection.

There is good evidence for divine intervention in the present. Christians disagree on the frequency of miracles in modern times. So, you get charismatics over at one end and liberals, if you like, over at the other end.

But, the phenomenon of conversion, both on the individual and societal level, these phenomena are striking. Well, that's basically our tour of the arguments against the

miraculous. They look strong when you hear them rattled off, but when you go and analyze them, they turn out to have some serious problems with them.

When you actually come to look at nature and history and such, there are definitely things going on there that a non-supernaturalistic view of the world has really not satisfactorily answered. What we hope to do now, in our future talks here in this series, is look at the miracles of Jesus and discuss what is going on and what it's telling us about Jesus. Okay, there we are.

What do we get? It's not 10 yet. Well, we can start to rip through some of the others then. I don't know how long they'll take.