

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Miracles, Session 4, Response to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Newman, Miracles, Session 4, Response to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This excerpt from Dr. Robert C. Newman's work addresses **various philosophical objections** against the possibility and believability of miracles. Newman examines arguments from thinkers like **Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Harnack, and Bultmann**, outlining their core reasoning for rejecting miracles. He then **offers counter-arguments**, critiquing the assumptions and logic presented by these philosophers. The discussion encompasses considerations of **natural law, empirical evidence, the nature of knowledge, historical context, and scientific paradigms** in relation to the miraculous. Ultimately, Newman argues that these objections are not sound and that there is **credible evidence for divine intervention** in the world.

2. 22 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Newman, Miracles, Session 4 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → NT Introduction → Miracles).



**Newman_Miracles_
Session04.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Newman, Miracles, Session 4, Response to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles

Briefing Document: Responding to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles

Overview: This briefing document summarizes the main themes and arguments presented by Dr. Robert C. Newman in Session 4 of his course, "The Miraculous and the Miracles of Jesus," focusing on responses to the liberal rejection of miracles. Newman addresses several key philosophical objections to miracles, primarily those raised by Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Harnack, and Bultmann, offering counter-arguments and drawing on biblical examples and logical reasoning.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Deductive Impossibility of Miracles (Spinoza):

- **Spinoza's Argument:** Miracles are violations of natural law, natural laws are immutable, and it's impossible to violate immutable laws; therefore, miracles are impossible.
- **Newman's Response: Violation vs. Override:** Newman argues that while some miracles might violate natural law, others may simply override them, similar to how humans override gravity. He states, "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."
- **Immutability of Natural Law:** The immutability of natural law is questioned. While humans cannot change fundamental constants, it is not obvious that God is similarly constrained. Newman posits, "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."
- **Logical Flaw:** Newman concludes that Spinoza's argument is unsound because its premises are not definitively true.

2. God's Inability to Violate Laws (Another Deductive Formulation):

- **Argument:** A miracle is a violation of natural law; to violate a law is to be illegal, immoral, irrational, or gauche; God is none of these; therefore, God cannot do miracles.
- **Newman's Response: Categorization of Natural Law:** This argument incorrectly assumes that natural law fits neatly into categories like civil, moral, logical, or aesthetic law. Newman argues, "To violate a natural law is merely to be miraculous, which is how the God of the Bible is regularly pictured."
- **Rejection of Premise:** The premise that violating a natural law is inherently negative (illegal, immoral, etc.) is rejected.

3. Inductive Improbability of Miracles (Hume):

- **Hume's Argument:** Experience is our only guide; natural laws are established by firm and unalterable experience; belief in witnesses is based on usual agreement with facts; miracles violate natural law; thus, miracles go against determining matters of fact; therefore, testimony of miracles should only be accepted if alternatives are more miraculous.
- **Newman's Response: Empiricism as the Sole Guide:** Newman questions pure empiricism as the only way of knowing, acknowledging Hume's point about the need for warrant in believing miracles. He emphasizes the biblical call to "Test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
- **Unalterable Experience:** Newman argues that the claim of "unalterable experience" begs the question by assuming miracles never occur.
- **Reliability of Witnesses:** The reliability of witnesses is more complex than Hume suggests, involving factors like the number of witnesses, their character, and potential gain from lying.
- **Nature of Violation:** While empirically miracles go against normal experience, this doesn't inherently negate their possibility.
- **Skepticism and Dismissal:** Newman criticizes Hume's conclusion that one should never accept miracle testimony, even if witnessed personally, as it sets an impossibly high bar and risks explaining away genuine events. He states, "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."

4. Practical Irrelevance of Miracles (Kant):

- **Kant's Argument:** We can only know appearances, not things in themselves; knowledge of God and transcendence is unwarranted speculation; we postulate God for morality; miracles are either daily (not miracles), seldom (unknowable), or never; true religion needs no miracles.
- **Newman's Response: Self-Defeating Premise:** The statement "we cannot know things as they really are unless we know how they really are" is deemed self-defeating.
- **Possibility of Revelation:** Newman argues that God, who knows reality, can reveal necessary truths to humanity.
- **Weak Foundation for Morality:** Postulating God without a basis in knowledge provides a weak defense against skepticism.
- **Frequency of Miracles:** Newman suggests Jesus likely performed miracles daily during his ministry, and miracles have occurred rarely at other times. He provides biblical examples (Judges 6:36-40, 1 Samuel 6:1-9) to illustrate the possibility of discerning miracles by "exhausting the probabilities." Regarding Gideon's fleece, Newman notes, "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."
- **Need for Redemptive Miracle:** While true religion needs no miracle to do right, humanity's fallen state necessitates a "redemptive miracle of atonement and regeneration." He asserts, "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."
- **Relevance to Salvation:** Miracles are relevant to redemptive religions that address humanity's fundamental need for salvation.

5. Ancient Ignorance and Miracles (Harnack):

- **Harnack's Argument:** People in antiquity believed miracles occurred daily due to their lack of understanding of nature; therefore, miracle reports in biblical times are unsurprising.

- **Newman's Response: Varying Beliefs:** Beliefs about miracles varied in antiquity, with both believers and skeptics (like the Epicureans and Sadducees). Newman suggests skepticism might be more prevalent today.
- **Recognition of Non-Miracle Workers:** The fact that John the Baptist was known for *not* performing miracles (John 10:41) indicates a discerning attitude towards claims of the miraculous.
- **Undeniable Miracles of Jesus:** The Sadducees themselves recognized the impossibility of denying Jesus' miracles (John 9:18, 11:47, 12:10; Acts 4:16).
- **Nature of Jesus' Miracles:** Jesus' miracles cannot be easily explained as misunderstood natural events. Newman dismisses liberal attempts to rationalize them, stating, "None of Jesus' miracles can easily be converted into misunderstood natural events, at least not taken as a group."

6. Miracles in a Closed Universe (Bultmann):

- **Bultmann's Argument:** Modern science and history assume a closed system of cause and effect for explanation and prediction; the old view attributed natural events to direct divine/spiritual causes; modern knowledge is superior.
- **Newman's Response: Assumption vs. Knowledge:** While science operates on this assumption, it doesn't definitively *know* the universe is a closed system. He points to unsolved mysteries like the origin of the universe and life.
- **Compatibility with Theism:** Scientific advancements are not inherently incompatible with Christian theism, with many Christians contributing to these fields.
- **Nuance in Biblical View:** The Bible doesn't portray God as the sole direct cause of all natural events, nor Satan as the sole cause of disease.
- **Possibility of Supernatural Intervention:** Current scientific understanding doesn't preclude the possibility of supernatural intervention or God's providential guidance.
- **Evidence for Divine Intervention:** Newman points to evidence for divine intervention in creation (origin of the universe, design, etc.), history (origin of Israel, fulfilled prophecy, origin of Christianity, Jesus' ministry and resurrection), and the present (conversion phenomena). He references the Jefferson Bible as an example of a deistic worldview that necessarily removes miracles.

Conclusion:

Newman concludes that the arguments against the miraculous, while seemingly strong initially, reveal significant weaknesses upon closer examination. He asserts that a non-supernaturalistic worldview fails to adequately explain various phenomena in nature and history. The course aims to further explore the miracles of Jesus and their significance.

4. Study Guide: Newman, Miracles, Session 4, Response to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles

Study Guide: Responding to Objections Against Miracles

Quiz

1. Explain Spinoza's deductive argument against the possibility of miracles in your own words. What is one key criticism Newman offers in response to this argument?
2. Summarize Hume's inductive argument for the improbability of miracles. According to Newman, what is a crucial flaw in Hume's reasoning concerning our belief in witnesses?
3. Describe Kant's argument for the practical irrelevance of miracles. What is Newman's counter-argument regarding our ability to know things as they really are?
4. According to Newman's interpretation of Harnack, what was the primary reason for the prevalence of miracle reports in antiquity? How does Newman challenge this view?
5. Outline Bultmann's argument against miracles based on the modern scientific worldview. What is Newman's primary objection to Bultmann's assertion of a "closed universe"?
6. What is the significance of the biblical passages cited (Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 John, Deuteronomy) in the context of responding to Hume's argument?
7. Explain the purpose of the examples of Gideon's fleece and the Philistines returning the Ark in Newman's discussion. What point is he trying to illustrate?
8. According to Newman, what fundamental human incapacity necessitates the need for redemptive miracles? How do scriptural miracles relate to this need?
9. Why does Newman consider the liberal rejection of miracles to be problematic in the context of salvation and the Last Judgment?
10. What are some of the areas of evidence that Newman suggests support the reality of divine intervention in the world, beyond the specific arguments addressed in this session?

Answer Key

1. Spinoza argued that miracles are impossible because they are violations of immutable natural laws, and it is impossible to violate immutable laws. Newman responds by questioning whether natural laws are truly immutable, especially to God, and points out that some miracles might override rather than violate these laws.
2. Hume argued that experience is our only guide, natural laws are based on firm experience, and miracles violate these laws, thus making testimony for miracles unreliable unless all alternatives are more miraculous. Newman argues that Hume's view of witness reliability is too simplistic and that we tend to adjust our skepticism based on the event's peculiarity.
3. Kant argued that we can only know appearances, not things as they are, making knowledge of God and transcendent reality speculation. He claimed miracles are either natural laws (if daily) or unknowable (if rare), rendering them irrelevant to morality and duty. Newman counters that Kant's initial premise is self-defeating ("we cannot know things as they really are unless we know how they really are") and that God can reveal necessary truths.
4. Harnack argued that people in antiquity readily believed in everyday miracles due to their misunderstanding of nature, making reports of Jesus' miracles unsurprising. Newman refutes this by stating that not everyone in antiquity believed in daily miracles (citing Epicureans and Sadducees) and that Jesus' miracles are not easily explained as misunderstood natural events.
5. Bultmann argued that modern science and history operate on the assumption of a closed universe of cause and effect, making miracles from an external agent incompatible with this worldview. Newman objects by stating that science and history do not have enough knowledge to definitively conclude the universe is a closed system, citing unanswered questions like the origin of the universe and life.
6. These biblical passages illustrate the importance of testing claims, even those seemingly spiritual or prophetic. This relates to Hume's argument by showing that even within a religious framework, discernment and critical evaluation are encouraged, suggesting that not all reported events should be accepted uncritically.
7. The examples of Gideon's fleece and the Ark's return illustrate scenarios where the probabilities of a natural occurrence were seemingly exhausted through specific and unlikely conditions being met. Newman uses these to argue that it is

possible to distinguish a miracle from a non-miracle with a reasonable degree of certainty, comparable to everyday decision-making.

8. Newman argues that humanity's fallen state has rendered it incapable of consistently doing what is right, necessitating a "redemptive miracle of atonement and regeneration." He states that the miracles in scripture point towards this Redeemer God who intervenes for salvation.
9. Newman contends that religions like deism and theological liberalism, which reject miracles, are "non-redemptive" and therefore will not lead to salvation at the Last Judgment. He believes miracles are intrinsically linked to God's saving work.
10. Newman suggests evidence for divine intervention can be found in the origin of the universe, the design of nature, the correlation between Genesis 1 and the origin of the earth, the origin of life and major body plans, the origin of mankind, the origin of Israel, fulfilled prophecy, the origin of Christianity, the phenomenon of Jesus' ministry (including his resurrection), and the phenomenon of conversion.

Essay Format Questions

1. Critically analyze Spinoza's deductive argument against miracles and evaluate the effectiveness of Newman's counter-arguments. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of both perspectives on the nature of natural law and divine intervention.
2. Compare and contrast the inductive arguments presented by Hume and the deductive arguments presented by Spinoza against the possibility or probability of miracles. How do these different approaches shape their conclusions, and which do you find more compelling?
3. Evaluate Kant's argument for the practical irrelevance of miracles in light of Newman's response. Discuss the implications of different epistemological frameworks (how we know what we know) for understanding the significance of miracles in religion and everyday life.
4. Discuss the historical context of the arguments against miracles presented by Harnack and Bultmann. How did the intellectual climate of their respective eras

(the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science) influence their critiques, and how relevant are these critiques today?

5. Based on the material presented by Newman, construct a comprehensive defense of the possibility and relevance of miracles. Utilize the counter-arguments provided against Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Harnack, and Bultmann, and consider the positive evidence for divine intervention that Newman briefly mentions.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Deductive Argument:** An argument that attempts to prove a conclusion with certainty based on premises that, if true, guarantee the truth of the conclusion.
- **Inductive Argument:** An argument that attempts to show that a conclusion is likely or probable based on evidence or observations.
- **Natural Law:** Principles or regularities observed in the natural world, often understood as descriptive (how things typically behave) or prescriptive (rules governing the universe).
- **Immutable:** Unchanging or unchangeable.
- **Empiricism:** The theory that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience.
- **Revelation:** The act of disclosing or communicating something hidden, especially divine truth.
- **Epistemology:** The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, justification, and the rationality of belief.
- **Skepticism:** An attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object.
- **Transcendent Reality:** A reality that exists beyond or is independent of the physical world and our sensory experience, often referring to the divine realm.
- **Closed Universe:** The view that the universe operates solely through natural laws and that there is no external intervention from a supernatural agent.

5. FAQs on Newman, Miracles, Session 4, Response to the Liberal Rejection of Miracles, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about Miracles

1. What is the core argument of Spinoza against the possibility of miracles, and what are the main criticisms of this argument?

Spinoza argued deductively that miracles are impossible because: (1) miracles are violations of natural law, (2) natural laws are immutable, and (3) it is impossible to violate immutable laws. The response to this includes questioning whether all miracles truly violate natural law, suggesting some may override them. Furthermore, the immutability of natural laws is challenged, as it is argued that while humans cannot alter them, it is not necessarily the case that God cannot. Finally, the impossibility of violating immutable laws is qualified by stating it is impossible for those to whom the laws are immutable, leaving open the possibility for a transcendent being like God.

2. How does another deductive argument claim God cannot perform miracles, and what are the flaws in this reasoning?

This argument posits that (1) a miracle is a violation of natural law, and (2) to violate a law is to be illegal, immoral, irrational, or gauche; therefore, (3) God, being none of these, cannot perform miracles. The main flaw lies in the second premise, which incorrectly assumes that natural laws are analogous to civil, moral, logical, or aesthetic laws. Violating a natural law, according to this response, simply means an event is miraculous, which aligns with the biblical portrayal of God.

3. What is Hume's inductive argument against miracles, and what are the counterarguments presented?

Hume argued that (1) experience is our only guide, (2) natural laws are based on unalterable experience, (3) belief in witnesses relies on their agreement with facts, (4) miracles violate natural law, (5) thus miracles contradict the evidence determining facts, and (6) testimony for miracles should only be accepted if alternatives are more miraculous. Counterarguments include questioning pure empiricism as the sole source of knowledge and pointing out that Hume's assertion of unalterable experience begs the question by assuming miracles never occur. The reliability of witnesses is also more complex than Hume suggests, involving factors beyond just agreement with usual facts. Finally, the assertion that one should never accept miracle testimony unless alternatives

are more miraculous is seen as an unreasonable barrier to accepting even genuine miracles.

4. According to the text, what is the importance of testing claims, even those related to the miraculous or revelation?

The text emphasizes the biblical mandate to test everything, referencing passages like Galatians 6:3-5, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, 1 John 4:1, and Deuteronomy 13:1-3, 18:18-22. This testing is crucial to avoid deception and false revelations. Even prophecies and claims made in the name of God should be scrutinized to ensure they align with established truths and that the predicted events come to pass. This principle applies to both individual actions and prophetic messages.

5. What is Kant's argument concerning the practical irrelevance of miracles, and how is this argument refuted?

Kant argued that (1) we can only know appearances, not reality, leading to (2) unwarranted speculation about God. (3) For practical purposes, we postulate God, freedom, and immortality for morality. (4) Miracles are either daily (not miracles), seldom (unknowable), or never (likely). (5) True religion needs no miracles and they might corrupt motives, making them irrelevant. The refutation argues that the first premise is self-defeating ("we cannot know things as they really are unless we know how they really are"). It also suggests that God can reveal necessary truths despite human limitations. Furthermore, it challenges the idea that postulating God without a basis in reality can withstand skepticism. Finally, it counters the notion that miracles are unknowable if infrequent, citing biblical examples where probabilities were exhausted to discern divine intervention.

6. What is Harnack's argument based on ancient ignorance regarding miracles, and what are the responses to this claim?

Harnack argued that (1) people in antiquity widely believed in daily miracles, making reports of Jesus' miracles unsurprising, and (2) their lack of understanding of nature led them to misinterpret natural events as miracles. The response points out that while some in antiquity believed in frequent miracles, others (like Epicureans and Sadducees) were skeptical, similar to today. Importantly, even among contemporaries, it was recognized that John the Baptist performed no miracles, while Jesus' miracles were undeniable even to his opponents. Furthermore, the text asserts that Jesus' miracles cannot be easily explained as misunderstood natural phenomena.

7. What is Bultmann's argument concerning miracles in a "closed universe," and how does the text challenge this view?

Bultmann argued that (1) modern science and history operate on the assumption of a closed universe of cause and effect, making miracles improbable. (2) This contrasts with ancient mythical views where supernatural entities directly caused natural events. The response acknowledges that science operates with such assumptions but argues that neither science nor history possesses enough knowledge to definitively prove the universe is a closed system. It highlights unexplained phenomena like the origin of the universe and life, and the apparent design in nature. Additionally, it clarifies that while past views may have oversimplified supernatural involvement, the Bible does not preclude God's mediated or direct intervention, nor can modern science definitively rule out supernatural influence on events like healing or weather.

8. What kind of evidence is presented in the text to support the reality of divine intervention and miracles?

The text suggests evidence for divine intervention can be found in several areas, elaborated upon in other courses and materials from IBRI. These areas include: the origin of the universe, the design observed within it, the correlation between Genesis 1 and the scientific understanding of Earth's origins, the origin of life and major biological structures, and the origin of humankind. Additionally, historical evidence is cited, such as the origin of Israel, fulfilled prophecies, the emergence of Christianity, and the events of Jesus' ministry, particularly his claims, miracles, and resurrection. Even in the present, the phenomenon of conversion is presented as a potential indicator of divine activity.